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## Editorial Note

Dear Readers,

寒さ厳しき折、いかがお過ごしでしょうか。

Following the change of the Editorial Board starting with Fasc. 64/65, the current issue of *Silva Iaponicarum* continues the trend of implementing major changes in the formula of our journal.

Starting from the present fascicle, Fasc. 66/Winter 2021, *Silva* will change its publication frequency from quarterly to biannual. We believe that a biannual mode of publication will be an accurate reflection of the actual authorship/readership demand and supply within which *Silva* currently operates.

Furthermore, the present fascicle also introduces new editorial conventions, including a range of changes and new standards in the adapted citation rules, the listing of references, and recommendations concerning formatting and style. You are invited to consult the updated set of editorial guidelines on the *Silva* homepage: <https://silvajp.web.amu.edu.pl/index.php/editorial-guidelines-for-silva-iaponicarum-authors/>.

In the present fascicle, we bring you two academic papers: one in the field of applied linguistics/second language education, the other from the area of social/political studies. In the former, Sara Librenjak analyzes the theoretical foundations of the choice and order of introducing basic kanji characters in popular textbooks in practical Japanese. In the latter, Agata Fijałkowska tackles the recent controversies behind Japan's residence card checker application, relating Japan's policy-making with business lobbying.

楽しんでお読みいただけましたら幸甚です。

We are awaiting your contributions and edited volume proposals at [silva.iaponicarum.quarterly@gmail.com](mailto:silva.iaponicarum.quarterly@gmail.com). You are encouraged to check our homepage on a regular basis for updates on our call for papers. We also invite you to visit our Facebook profile (<https://www.facebook.com/silvaiaponicarum/>).

With very best wishes of a Happy New Year 2022 |

本年もどうぞよろしくお願いいいたします。

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## Considering the Learning Order of Kanji: the Role of Frequency and Learning Cost, and Analysis of Beginner Textbooks

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### ABSTRACT

For many learners, Japanese kanji characters are one of the most difficult areas in learning Japanese as a foreign language. Even though there is numerous research in kanji teaching methodology, very few researchers tackle the topic of kanji learning order (Paxton 2015; Shpika 2016b; Kandrač 2020, 2021). This paper explores the issue of choosing *which kanji* to learn and in *which order*. I discuss the kanji frequency data and its influence on kanji choice, the linguistic and computational approach to kanji ordering, and the concept of kanji learning cost introduced by Yan et al. (2013). Lastly, I analyze the kanji lists and kanji order in the beginner issues of two popular Japanese language textbooks, *Minna-no Nihongo* and *Genki*. This research aims to provide the groundwork for future research in kanji learning order optimization and for empirical research in the effects of learning kanji in a different order.

**KEYWORDS:** kanji, Japanese teaching, kanji learning order, kanji frequency, learning cost, textbook analysis

### Introduction

Teaching Japanese kanji characters to learners from countries that do not use a Chinese-characters based script has been recognized as a specific challenge in the broader field of teaching Japanese as a foreign language (Iwashita and Sekiguchi 2009; Yencken 2010; Rose 2010; Mori 2012).

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There is a plethora of research on kanji teaching methodology. Researchers focus, among others, on kanji learning strategies (Bourke 1997; Shimizu and Green 2002; de Sá 2015), motivation (Hamada and Grafström 2014; Nesbitt and Muller 2016), mnemonics, componential analysis (Yamashita and Maru 2000; Toyoda et al. 2013), and on digital tools (Lin et al. 2007; Librenjak et al. 2012). It can be said that we research everything about teaching kanji – except *which* kanji to teach and *in which order*.

Since 2010<sup>2</sup>, there are 2136 common-use (or *jōyō*) kanji standardized by the Japanese Ministry of Education Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter MEXT). That is the exact number of kanji officially taught in the Japanese school system, where 1026 are taught in primary school (first six years), and the remaining 1100 in junior high school (three years). The order of teaching kanji in Japanese schools is decided by MEXT. Native speakers of the Japanese language acquire them gradually over the years and there is not much literature citing the native speakers' learning order as a significant issue. However, in this paper, I discuss the order and choice of kanji for foreign learners of the Japanese language. By default, they are expected to learn the same list, but in a fraction of time compared to the Japanese children, and without the native knowledge of the language. The list made for children was based not only on kanji frequency but also on the age of children learning that kanji. Therefore, children are expected to learn some visually complex kanji (e.g. for animals in the first and second grade), but these characters might not be easy to learn nor particularly useful for foreign learners of the Japanese language who are not of primary school age. Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), a standardized test aimed at foreign learners, and Japanese language and kanji textbooks aim at the same 2136 characters as the end goal. Although even native speakers have difficulties mastering all of the characters<sup>3</sup>, this goal is rarely questioned. There is very little research that explicitly deals with the kanji learning order. Popular textbooks such as *Minna-no Nihongo*, *Genki*, *Yōkoso*, *Nakama*, *Marugoto*, *Daichi*, *Tobira*, and others present kanji as an integral part of the Japanese language study, but do not explain the choice of kanji or their order in much detail. The choice of kanji in these textbooks is influenced by Japanese school grade learning order, the categorization of kanji characters standardized by the MEXT and by the Japanese Language Proficiency Test

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<sup>2</sup> Between 1981 and 2010, there were 1945 standardized characters. Before 1981, the list consisted of 1850 characters, and they were called *tōyō kanji*.

<sup>3</sup> Passing rates of Kanji Kentei exam Level 2, which contains all 2136 kanji and is aimed at native speakers, are only around 21.2%, according to the official statistics.



lists, which are, in turn, influenced by the frequency of kanji in corpora and choices made by linguists and language teachers.

Since there is no empirical research on the topic yet<sup>4</sup>, it is hard to prove whether the order in any of the textbooks is good or bad on its own. There is anecdotal evidence from an occasional student who claims that the order is confusing and yearns to find some rules and systematic principles behind it, such as dissecting kanji into components and using mnemonics, as in Heisig's *Remembering the Kanji* system (2011). However, determining the right order is not an easy task. Before undertaking such a task, we need to analyze the present situation and understand the potential issues of the order presented in commonly used materials. This work aims to provide the groundwork for research on optimization of kanji learning order and for empirical research about the effects of learning kanji in a different order.

In this paper, I explore the basic principles behind the choice of kanji when making study lists and discuss various methods of ordering kanji. I compare manual approaches with computational approaches and observe good and bad points in both. I also introduce the concept of the learning cost of a kanji (or hanzi, since the term originated in the Chinese language teaching field) and discuss how the measure can be adapted into Japanese. Lastly, I analyze the kanji coverage and order in two beginner Japanese textbooks: *Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1* and *2* (Suriiee Nettowāku 2012) and *Genki 1* and *2* (Banno et al. 2020).

### **1. Kanji Frequency – a Basis for Choosing *Which* Kanji to Learn First**

Kanji frequency is defined as a relative count of appearances of a character in a text corpus, and it is important because more frequent characters cover a large majority of the text. In accordance with Zipf's law<sup>5</sup> (1949) and as confirmed by research (National Language Research Institute of Japan 1997; Chikamatsu et al. 2000; Shpika 2016a), the most frequent 100 kanji cover 40% of all the kanji in the text, and most frequent 1000 cover more than 90%. Figure 1 shows the distribution of kanji frequency and text coverage in four web-corpora: Aozora books corpus, newspaper corpus, Wikipedia, and Twitter. Chikamatsu et al. (2000) found similar results in the newspaper corpus from 1966 and 1993.

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<sup>4</sup> Excluding the survey on students' opinions, such as Paxton's (2015) presented later in the paper.

<sup>5</sup> Zipf's Law is an empirical law that states that the rank-frequency distribution is an inverse relation. In a text, the most frequent units cover the vast majority of all units, e.g., the most common words in English account for 90% of all words in a corpus.

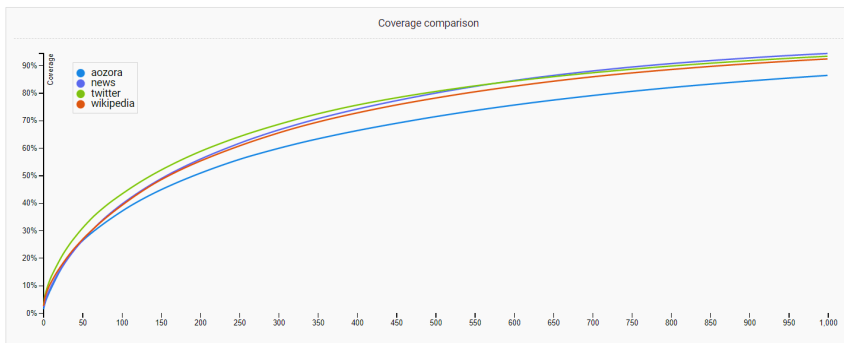


Figure 1. Coverage comparison in four different corpora<sup>6</sup>

This data means that knowing only half of the 2136 common-use kanji would account for almost all kanji one can encounter in a given text. Therefore, it is very important which kanji are learned first, and their frequency plays a crucial role in determining that.

The first major kanji frequency research was conducted by the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NLRI) in 1962, and it was based on the frequency in Asahi newspapers from 1952. The updated lists were published in 1976 (based on the newspaper from 1966), in 1993 (based on the newspaper from the same year), and in 2004. These publications solidified the notion that the frequency in the newspapers is the norm for defining kanji frequency.

Chikamatsu et al. (2000) compared the 1966 and 1993 newspaper corpora and found a high correlation between kanji frequency, which shows that there are no significant changes in how kanji are used in newspapers. However, comparing their findings to Figure 1, which is based on more recent data, we can see that kanji in different corpora also differ in frequency, and Japanese newspapers might be biased towards certain topics. In the digital age, when it is easier to collect texts, it is no longer necessary for us to depend only on newspapers to get the data about frequency. Still, most digital resources, such as e-dictionaries based on EDICT<sup>7</sup>, which take frequency into account, base their kanji choices on the data from the newspaper corpora.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from <https://scriptin.github.io/kanji-frequency/>.

<sup>7</sup> Major digital dictionary resource by Jim Breen, also known as WWWJIC (Breen 2011). Many free e-dictionaries such as Jisho.org are based on this data.

## 2. Linguistic Research on Kanji Learning Order

Recently, some researchers have taken up the issue of kanji learning order: Paxton (2015) covers the topic in his thesis by conducting a survey on Japanese learners where they graded kanji clusters by the difficulty of acquisition. The learning order is not mentioned in the title, but the questions he poses to the learners demonstrate his interest in the issue. He found that the learners considered the pictogram cluster (山、川、田), the first-grade kanji cluster (森、雨、車), the compound-based kanji cluster (日+本=日本、学+生=学生), and the component-analyzed cluster (田力男、女子好) as the easiest to learn, while they rated the component-led cluster (姉妹女、話語言) as the most difficult. These responses might lead to the conclusion that learners do not want to learn kanji in a systematic way. However, the choice of characters that Paxton used in his survey might have influenced the results. Also, the fact that pictograms and first-grade kanji are the easiest to learn has a very limited impact on ordering, since there are less than 100 characters that belong in that category. Learners, especially beginners, might not have the best judgment on which learning order is most efficient, and it is questionable whether their perception correlates with the actual retention of characters. Still, Paxton's work is important as one of the few publications that question what makes kanji easy or difficult and start the debate on the learning order.

Even more recent is the research by Kandrač (2020, 2021), which focuses on learning order specifically. Kandrač proposes multi-criteria-based ordering (MBO). He also sorts kanji in clusters but takes their reading into account, not only their shape. Using the example of 盜 ‘to steal’ and 次 ‘next’, which is a component of the first character, he argues against learning them together because the first character is read [トウ] /tō/ and the second character is read [シ] /shi/ or [ジ] /ji/. Following that notion, similarly to the pioneering work by Pye (1971; 1984)<sup>8</sup>, Kandrač proposes clusters based on their shared reading instead of using only a shared component. Figure 2 shows an example of clusters sharing the 者 ‘person’ component.

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<sup>8</sup> In “The study of kanji”, Pye sorts *jōyō* kanji according to their *on’yomi* (Chinese) readings and visual similarity.

cluster 1 >>> 者 ‘person’ and 煮 ‘boil’ [シヤ] /sha/

cluster 2 >>> 諸 ‘various’, 署 ‘signature’ and 緒 ‘begin’ [シヨ] /sho/

Figure 2. Kanji clusters influenced by components and *on* ‘yomi’ reading<sup>9</sup>

Kandrač publishes the list of kanji sorted by his criteria online, advising a smaller final goal of kanji to learn. He argues, based on Tokuhiko and Kawamura (2007), that it is not necessary to learn all 2136 kanji. Tokuhiko and Kawamura found that almost 600 kanji from that list are used only in one or two words. Kandrač surmises that because of that, only around 1500 kanji are needed, and plans to publish lists with 2000, 1800, 1500, and 1336 characters. The lists are not available yet to the general public, but the project is promising.

### 3. Computational Approach to Kanji Learning Order

More interest in the topic of kanji learning order can be found in the field of computer science and applied informatics. Even though his project is not academic, Shpika (2016b) proposes a novel approach to kanji ordering using a topological sort algorithm. Topological sort is a method of sorting nodes in a direct-acyclic graph (DAG) in such a way that the prerequisite comes before other nodes. It has many applications, such as scheduling and critical path analysis. In terms of kanji learning, using a topological sort would mean introducing the components or parts of a kanji before the kanji which consists of those parts. For example, one would need to learn 亡 ‘to disappear’ and 心 ‘heart, mind’ before learning the kanji 忘 ‘to forget’ which contains both components. The topological sort algorithm by Kahn (1962) enables us to computationally sort kanji so that the part will always come before the complex character. Shpika (2016b) applied his algorithm using JavaScript and Json and sorted all *jōyō* kanji (and more). His project TopoKanji is not heavily documented and is published on GitHub<sup>10</sup>.

However, the idea of applying a topological sort in kanji ordering originally comes from another research project, one in the field of Chinese hanzi characters. Yan et al. (2013) used a network approach to build an “efficient learning strategy” of Chinese hanzi characters, but despite using a different term in the title of their paper, they were working to optimize the learning order. They constructed a node-weighted network using character frequency

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Kandrač’s website

(<https://sites.google.com/view/kanjipedia/mbo/introduction>).

<sup>10</sup> <https://github.com/scriptin/topokanji>.

as their basis, where nodes with a higher frequency had a higher weight. These nodes were deemed more important in the ranking, and therefore, they ranked higher in the final ordering. That is because the characters in a text follow Zipf's law (1949). Even though Yan et al. algorithm does not include the topological sort, the nodes in the network include the components which make up the more complex characters, and the authors acknowledge the topological nature of the character network in their text. Figure 3 shows an excerpt of a character network with hanzi characters, adapted from the Yan et al. Bigger nodes represent the nodes with more children nodes, or in other words, components that make up a higher number of kanji.

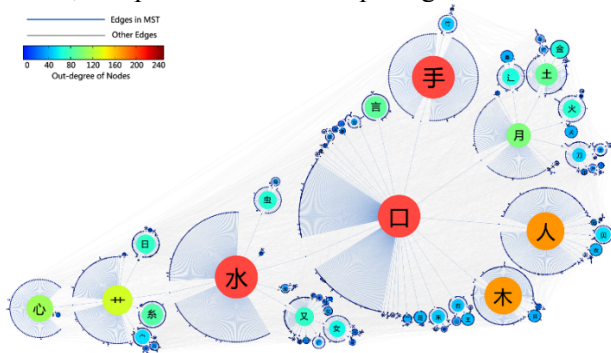


Figure 3. Full map of the Chinese character network in Yan et al. (2013)<sup>11</sup>

Building upon that, Loach and Wang (2016) propose a novel topological sort algorithm which, by their own evaluation, outperforms the Yan et al. algorithm. Figure 4 shows Japanese kanji ordered using a topological sort algorithm. The orange nodes are starting nodes, meaning that they are the minimal components, and they should be introduced before the white nodes. The list in the image can be linearly sorted like this: 米女女数又努力矛務.

<sup>11</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23990887/#&gid=article-figures&pid=figure-2-uid-1>

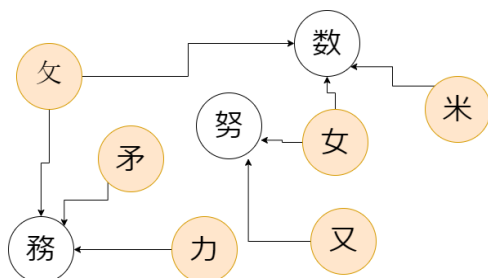


Figure 4. Kanji ordered using topological sort algorithm (Loach and Wang 2016).

This is the basic method used by Shpika (2016b) in his TopoKanji project. He sorts all 2136 *jōyō* kanji, and no character is introduced before its components, and the kanji-component frequency<sup>12</sup> is consulted. More common kanji and more common components will come earlier in the order. Even though this idea sounds good, the result may look more confusing to the learner who is accustomed to textbooks where kanji is often ordered thematically. For example, almost all Japanese textbooks teach number kanji together, but the topological sort algorithm on its own has no linguistic or semantic knowledge. As a result, kanji with similar meanings, such as numbers, are scattered all over the list. Figure 5 shows the first 200 characters ordered by the TopoKanji algorithm, and the number kanji are marked in orange.

<sup>12</sup> Shpika calculated kanji frequency using his own methodology, in four web-based corpora. See <https://scriptin.github.io/kanji-frequency/>.

1	一	21	口	41	卜	61	前	81	高	101	長	121	厂	141	用	161	体	181	文
2	丨	22	山	42	上	62	乙	82	心	102	久	122	广	142	通	162	矢	182	对
3	口	23	出	43	凵	63	乂	83	思	103	夕	123	度	143	白	163	知	183	天
4	日	24	土	44	尹	64	气	84	又	104	升	124	冢	144	勺	164	都	184	関
5	十	25	丶	45	事	65	氣	85	么	105	六	125	宀	145	的	165	尸	185	車
6	干	26	寸	46	王	66	東	86	夕	106	免	126	冢	146	三	166	戸	186	勝
7	年	27	寺	47	玉	67	彡	87	後	107	明	127	川	147	甲	167	所	187	…
8	人	28	時	48	口	68	者	88	言	108	京	128	首	148	单	168	主	188	馬
9	大	29	中	49	国	69	扌	89	立	109	乍	129	辶	149	戈	169	ㄗ	189	尺
10	丿	30	彳	50	了	70	手	90	冫	110	イ	130	辶	150	戰	170	社	190	駅
11	丁	31	行	51	子	71	自	91	部	111	作	131	道	151	己	171	禾	191	金
12	竹	32	目	52	巾	72	未	92	勺	112	女	132	可	152	弓	172	私	192	島
13	笑	33	儿	53	一	73	来	93	勿	113	耳	133	何	153	第	173	表	193	無
14	二	34	見	54	市	74	也	94	場	114	取	134	牛	154	予	174	当	194	連
15	丿	35	今	55	門	75	地	95	同	115	最	135	物	155	里	175	開	195	申
16	冂	36	刀	56	間	76	合	96	斤	116	下	136	回	156	野	176	舌	196	神
17	月	37	分	57	生	77	方	97	新	117	名	137	内	157	力	177	話	197	理
18	八	38	厶	58	冂	78	小	98	入	118	弋	138	止	158	千	178	業	198	共
19	木	39	云	59	学	79	県	99	衣	119	代	139	定	159	重	179	万	199	已
20	本	40	会	60	川	80	田	100	良	120	廿	140	全	160	動	180	成	200	選

Figure 5. First 200 kanji ordered by the topological sort algorithm (Shpika 2016b).

The order depicted in Figure 5 differs dramatically from Japanese language textbooks such as *Genki* or *Minna-no Nihongo*, where kanji are sorted pedagogically<sup>13</sup>. Kanji for numbers are usually taught first, but in this list the kanji for number 1 (一) appears first in the list, followed by the kanji for number 2 (二) in the 14th position, and the kanji for number 3 (三) in the 146th position. Other than that, kanji for number 8 (八), 1000 (千), and ten thousand (万), in the 18th, 158th, and 179th positions respectively, appear in the first 200 characters. Interestingly, kanji which is visually similar to 1000 (千), 干 ‘to dry’ is in the 6th position, preceding much more useful kanji for beginners. Kanji for other basic digits appear later in the list. In conclusion, this order might be computationally optimal but possibly

<sup>13</sup> At least in the first lessons.

confusing for a learner. Shpika's work is based on a valid idea, but without pedagogical intervention, it is not very useful in practice<sup>14</sup>.

#### 4. Character Learning Cost in Chinese Hanzi

Both Yan et al. (2013) and Loach and Wang (2016) measure the success of their algorithms by computing proposed learning curves, calculating the learning efficiency and the learning cost. This measure should approximate how much effort a learner should put into acquiring the characters in a certain order. In Yan et al. (2013), it is explained simply: the cost of a character equals the cost of its sub-characters (here: components), and it is influenced by a learner's previous knowledge of the components or lack thereof. Using an example from Japanese, kanji 繋 'to connect' consists of three sub-characters or components: 車 'a car', 又 "ru-mata component or radical 79" and 糸 'a thread', and each component comprising the character contributes 1 to the learning cost. Each unlearned component contributes 1 to the learning cost, and each learned component contributes 0. Therefore, if a learner knows none of the components, the learning cost of the character 繋 'to connect' is  $3+1+1+1=6$ , and if they know all the components, it is  $3+0+0+0=3$ . This simple model accentuates the fact that knowing the parts does facilitate learning the whole character. However, despite its being intuitive, there is no research to confirm the validity of the model.

Loach and Wang (2016) propose a more complex model to compute not only the learning cost of a character but also the learning curve and learning efficiency. Instead of counting each component (in their text: primitive) as 1, they use the formula  $c_i^{(p)} = 1 + \gamma^{1.5} s_i$  where  $s_i$  is the number of strokes that make up the character. The component 口 'mouth, entrance' has three strokes, so its learning cost would be  $c_i^{(\square)} = 1 + 0.3 = 1.3$ , and the component 無 'not there, nothingness' has 12 strokes, making its learning cost  $c_i^{(\text{無})} = 1 + 1.1 = 2.2$ . Additionally, the authors use a different formula for computing a learning cost of a compound character (a character comprised of more than one component). The cost of learning a compound is  $c_i^{(c)} = 1 + m_i$ , where  $m_i$  is the number of components used to build the character. So the cost of the previously mentioned character 繋 would be 3 because it is comprised of three components (車, 又, 糸), and the issue of

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<sup>14</sup> The author acknowledges that this is not everything needed for kanji learning and is starting a new project on <https://github.com/scriptin/marujj>.

<sup>15</sup>  $\gamma$  is taken to be 0.1.



the components being known or unknown does not affect the learning cost. Loach and Wang (ibid.) improved the model by adding the number of strokes, but the omission of the learned / unlearned status of a component might not be the best choice. However, their model for calculating the learning cost of a character is not tested or evaluated in practice either.

### **5. Kanji and the Learning Cost – a Possible Measure or a Weak Approximation?**

There is no published work applying the concept of the learning cost to Japanese kanji instead of Chinese hanzi. It may seem tempting to simply use the same model in Japanese, but one of the big differences between kanji and hanzi is the number of readings. Hanzi, in general, have only one way to pronounce them, and it is usually consistent in compound words. On the other hand, kanji have at least two readings on average: a native Japanese reading called *kun'yomi* and a Sino-Japanese reading called *on'yomi*. There are no limits on how many readings a character can have, so some visually simple and very common characters can have a huge number of readings. To additionally complicate things, the readings are not regular in compound words. Therefore, it is necessary to memorize which part of a word is written in okurigana<sup>16</sup>, and it may be very difficult to determine which reading is used in the word unless the kanji has only one *kun'yomi* and only one *on'yomi*. Therefore, it is necessary to include the number of readings when calculating how difficult it is to learn a kanji.

This is not the only adaptation to the previously mentioned systems. Considering the importance of the kanji frequency introduced in Section 1, I decided to include the frequency rank of a kanji. What is more, I argue that it is one of the most important components when calculating the learning cost. Common characters are often seen and used, and exposure to such a character causes a learner to acquire it sooner compared to characters seen only in textbooks but never used.

The proposed learning cost of a kanji character  $c^{(k)}$  is defined as a sum of the following: the number of strokes  $s$  (ranging from 1 to more than 20), frequency ranking  $f$  (ranging from 1.0 to around 25, 1 being the most

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<sup>16</sup> Okurigana is the syllabic script hiragana used to write the part of the word after kanji, sometimes the part that conjugates – but not always.

frequent<sup>17</sup>) and the number of readings  $r$  multiplied by  $2^{18}$ . The learning cost should represent the effort necessary to learn a kanji, and its result is not comparable to those presented in Section 4. The formula I propose for kanji is:

$$c^{(k)} = s + f + r * 2$$

For example, kanji 止 ‘to stop’ has 4 strokes and a frequency rating of 3.1, but it has as many as 15 different readings. However, some of the readings listed are a variant of the same reading, so after pruning the repetitive ones, we end up with 8. Its learning cost is  $c^{(止)} = 4 + 3.1 + 8 * 2 = 23.1$ . The kanji 春 ‘spring’ has 9 strokes, a frequency rating of 5.7, but only two readings, making its learning cost  $c^{(春)} = 9 + 5.7 + 2 * 2 = 18.7$ . Even though the character 春 ‘spring’ seems more complex, a learner will have a somewhat easier time using it because there are only two readings, but they are close in the learning cost. Next, let’s consider the visually complex but frequent character 裁 ‘to judge / to sew’:  $c^{(裁)} = 12 + 2.9 + 3 * 2 = 20.9$ . It may seem counterintuitive, but this character compensates for its complexity with its frequency. Comparing it to the very rare and complex character 鮭 ‘salmon’:  $c^{(鮭)} = 17 + 24.7 + 5 * 2 = 51.7$ , we find that the character 鮭 has the highest learning cost among all characters mentioned.

In the research by Yan et al. (2013) and Loach & Wang (2016), this learning cost measure was used to evaluate their hanzi ordering algorithm. I argue that, since the measure is not tested empirically, it could be used to help in *ordering the characters*, but not as an evaluation measure before testing it with students.

In order to prove that the kanji learning cost measure uses relevant characteristics, empirical research needs to be conducted. After that, the measure may be adjusted or completely changed – adding the number of components or even the frequency of components might be relevant; however, there are no solid arguments in the current research that point to their relevancy.

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<sup>17</sup> The frequency rank is computed as follows: the most common character (ranked 1st) has a value of 1.0. The next character has a value of 1.1, then 1.2, etc. The frequency should be calculated using corpora of different fields combined into one corpus, instead of just newspapers, such as Kanji Frequency data by Shpika (2016a).

<sup>18</sup> Readings data is provided by Breen’s EDICT (Breen 2011). The multiplier (2) reflects the complexity of added readings.

The measure of the learning cost could be useful, and it is worth exploring in future research, but it needs to be tested empirically, possibly with several different cost models.

## **6. Kanji Choice and Order in Popular Japanese Textbooks: a Case of *Minna-no Nihongo* and *Genki***

For beginner learners of Japanese as a foreign language, two commonly used textbooks are *Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1* and *2* and *Genki 1* and *2*. Other textbooks, such as *Marugoto*, *Daichi*, *Yōkoso*, *Nakama*, *Japanese for Busy People* are also used in some settings, but in this paper, I focus on *Minna-no Nihongo* (Suriie Nettowāku 2012) and *Genki* (Banno et al. 2020) as they are the most common textbooks and a large number of learners is influenced by the way they present kanji characters. I analyzed the number of kanji in both books, and I compared the coverage to Japanese schools and the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) and the order in which kanji is presented. I do not judge the ordering in either of the textbooks as *good* or *bad* because, as I explained in the previous sections, it is impossible without an empirically proven measure. However, I provide facts that can be taken as positive or negative depending on one's learning goals, and, hopefully, they will help the users of textbooks to decide which one fits their goals better<sup>19</sup>.

The first book, *Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1*, includes 218 kanji and 350 compounds. They cover 72.5% of characters included in the list for passing JLPT N4 (the approximate equivalent of A2 level in CEFR, i.e. the level which the textbooks are targeting). The second book, *Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 2*, introduces another 312 kanji, covering 530 cumulatively. On the other hand, books *Genki 1–2* present 316 kanji throughout 23 lessons, a considerably smaller number compared to *Minna-no Nihongo*. The first book, *Genki 1*, introduces 144 kanji, and the second book, *Genki 2*, includes further 172 kanji. The first *Genki* textbook covers a little below 50%, but both cover around 84% of JLPT N4 kanji. At first glance, it may seem that *Genki* chooses kanji more efficiently, but we must remember that the JLPT N4 exam is only one possible goal and might not be the same for every learner. In order to present a more thorough analysis, I calculated the coverage of all JLPT levels, as well as the most frequent 100, 200, and 500

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<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that there is very little information in the textbooks on why certain kanji were chosen and why that particular order was chosen, so the results concerning coverage may be either coincidental or purposeful.

kanji in both textbooks. Table 1 shows the coverage of the JLPT exam level for all analyzed textbooks.

<b>Textbook</b>	<b>JLPT N5</b>	<b>JLPT N4</b>	<b>JLPT N3</b>	<b>JLPT N2</b>	<b>JLPT N1</b>
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1</i> (includes previous levels)	94.17 %	72.53 %	33.02 %	21.28 %	10.08 %
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1</i> (only new characters) <sup>20</sup>	94.17 %	60.22 %	1.93%	0.48%	0%
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 2</i> (includes previous levels)	5.8%	27.46 %	33.17 %	26.63 %	13.00 %
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 2</i> (only new characters)	5.8%	39.77 %	37.67 %	5.52%	0.70%
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1 and 2</i>	100%	100%	36.6%	6.24%	0.70%
<i>Genki 1</i>	88.34 %	48.59 %	22.17 %	13.95 %	6.61%
<i>Genki 1</i>	88.34 %	25.96 %	1.38%	0%	0%
<i>Genki 2</i>	9.7%	40.49 %	23.72 %	15.51 %	7.45%
<i>Genki 2</i>	9.7%	58.01 %	10.52 %	1.57%	0.28%
<i>Genki 1 and 2</i>	100%	83.97 %	36.60 %	6.24%	0.70%

Table 1. Coverage of JLPT kanji for *Minna-no Nihongo* and *Genki* textbooks

<sup>20</sup> The grey rows indicate how much characters of each level contribute individually, while the black rows indicate cumulative result.

Even though *Genki* textbooks cover only 60% of *Minna-no Nihongo* characters, the coverage of JLPT kanji is very similar. Both textbooks cover the lowest, N5 level, almost completely by the first book and completely by the end of the second book.

*Minna-no Nihongo*, covering 40% more kanji, has higher overall numbers. In theory, a learner would be able to pass N4 by the end of the first book. However, the second book is not as well adapted to the JLPT exam requirements as the first one. Most kanji are from the N3 level, but the difference between the remaining N4 and more advanced N2 kanji is considerably small, each level containing about a third of all kanji from the second book. I conclude that the first *Minna-no Nihongo* textbook has a comprehensive beginner list of kanji, while the second book is unrelated to JLPT goals.

*Genki 1*, on the other hand, mostly focuses on JLPT N5 kanji and a half of N4, while *Genki 2* introduces almost all remaining N4 kanji and a third of N3. The higher levels are, as expected, not included in the beginner textbook. I can conclude that *Genki* textbooks are decently covering JLPT content and adding kanji appropriately according to students' progress.

Next, I consider the coverage of the most frequent kanji<sup>21</sup> in both *Minna-no Nihongo* and *Genki* textbooks and present the results in Table 2.

Textbook	100 most frequent	200 most frequent	500 most frequent
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1</i> (includes previous levels)	61%	47.5%	32.2%
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1</i> (only new characters) <sup>22</sup>	61%	34 %	13,2 %
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 2</i> (includes previous levels)	34%	33.5%	30.8%
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 2</i> (only new characters)	34%	33%	29%
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1 and 2</i>	<b>95%</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>63%</b>

<sup>21</sup> I use the results from the web corpora in the Kanji frequency project (2016) as they are the most recent and comprehensive.

<sup>22</sup> The grey rows indicate how much characters of each level contribute individually, while the black rows indicate cumulative result.

<b><i>Genki 1</i></b>	52%	39.5%	22.4%
<i>Genki 1</i>	52%	27%	11%
<b><i>Genki 2</i></b>	28%	24%	22.8%
<i>Genki 2</i>	28%	20%	22%
<b><i>Genki 1 and 2</i></b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>63.5%</b>	<b>42.5%</b>

Table 2. Coverage of most frequent 100, 200, and 500 kanji for *Minna-no Nihongo* and *Genki* textbooks

We can see that both textbooks contain the most frequent characters, *Minna-no Nihongo* preceding *Genki* in numbers, mostly because it has 40% more kanji. A closer look at *Minna-no Nihongo 1* is showing falling numbers per category, meaning that the kanji list was made with significant influence of the frequency list. However, *Minna-no Nihongo 2* is again displaying equal results across the three different frequency lists. There seems to be no difference in how much of the 100, 200, or 500 most frequent characters it includes, hinting at the fact that the frequency played a small role in ordering the kanji. When viewing the *Minna-no Nihongo* textbooks together, they cover a decent amount of the most frequent kanji, but they might not be the most efficient. With 530 kanji, they cover only 81% of the 200 most frequent ones. *Genki* textbooks follow the same pattern: the first textbook is strongly influenced by frequency, and the second one is less dependent on it. With 316 kanji, they cover 63.5% of the first 200 in the frequency ranking. These numbers can be compared using the measure of precision, which will find how many of the frequent kanji is accurately included in each of the textbooks, using the threshold of 200 most common kanji. Precision is calculated as the ratio of the number of pertinent items (frequent kanji included) to the number of total items (all kanji) but normalized in accordance with the list size. The results are displayed in Table 3.

Textbook	Method of calculation	Precision score
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1</i>	95 / 200 from the list of 218	43,58%
<i>Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 2</i>	67 / 200 from the list of 312	21,47%
both <i>Minna</i> textbooks	162 / 200 from the list of 530	<b>23,77%</b>
<i>Genki 1</i>	79 / 200 from the list of 144	54,86%
<i>Genki 2</i>	48 / 200 from the list of 172	27,91%
both <i>Genki</i> textbooks	127/ 200 from the list of 316	<b>40,19%</b>

Table 3. Comparison of normalized precision in kanji choice in *Minna-no Nihongo* and *Genki* for the 200 most common kanji.

As can be seen in Table 3, *Genki* textbooks (especially the first one) are significantly better in including frequent kanji in their lists, and *Minna-no Nihongo* textbooks could be more efficient in choosing kanji, considering a large number of characters introduced. Of course, frequency is not the only relevant measure, but it seems that the second textbook was created with fewer principles in mind compared to the first one.

As for the order within lessons, in *Minna-no Nihongo* the principle of teaching kanji for compounds is prevalent. There is some order based on semantic principles, such as grouping similar concepts in the same lesson. For example, in Unit 9–10, the following kanji is presented: 体足口顔耳目 立知住思使作品長明肉. The characters 体足口顔耳目 are grouped semantically as body parts; following is a cluster of verb-related kanji: 立知住思使作. The lesson ends with four unrelated characters: 品 ‘goods’ (possibly because of the repetition of the 口 component), two kanji used mainly as adjectives, i.e. 長 ‘long, chief’, and 明 ‘bright’, and the noun 肉 ‘meat’. If we look at this lesson in the context of all kanji in *Minna-no Nihongo*, we find that there is no regard for the componential analysis, and each kanji is presented as a pictogram with no relation to similarly looking characters. Table 4 shows the full list of *Minna-no Nihongo* kanji order. One

may notice that more complex kanji are often taught before their compounds, and visually similar kanji are never grouped.

<i>Minna-no Nihongo 1</i>	<i>Minna-no Nihongo 2</i>
一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十	悪 急 去 紙 首 県 都 速 直 接 湯 探
人 名 方 本 日 何 大 学 会 社 先 生 行 来	参 寺 勝 負 願 座 眠 狹 甘 辛 卵 申
自 車	空 業 鳥 通 味 運 転 力 色 取 荷 簡
百 千 万 円 毎 時 分 半 国 月 火 水 木 金	単 覚 販 忙 給 慣 涼 将 夢 疲 痛 彼
土 書	地 走 集 研 究 曜 重 池 形 横 橋 決
友 年 今 週 休 前 午 後 校 帰 見 聞 読 食	相 談 忘 置 授 苦 劳 希 望 復 植 机
飲 買	東 西 南 北 雨 風 夕 服 予 晴 星 熱
母 父 物 朝 昼 夜 晚 町 山 白 赤 青 黒 安	約 束 辞 練 返 最 続 客 角 治 格 卒
高 小	以 質 薬 注 閉 番 号 交 危 具 席 払
男 女 上 下 左 右 中 門 間 近 魚 手 犬 早	無 失 礼 黄 非 常 逃 規 則 守 歯 並
計 外	工 村 所 暑 寒 便 利 泳 活 向 困 丸
兄 弟 姉 妹 家 族 春 夏 秋 冬 気 天 多 少	機 曲 皆 違 務 法 島 信 遅 許 可 禁
元 歩	発 光 飯 台 題 待 米 宿 成 港 拾 捨
入 出 広 止 始 開 海 川 世 界 画 映 花 茶	輸 招 呼 原 科 頼 技 術 退 性 岸 変
語 英	代 死 合 結 婚 式 全 次 必 要 故 絶
体 足 口 顔 耳 目 立 知 住 思 使 作 品 長	对 然 難 残 念 複 雑 汚 表 倒 込 確
明 肉	説 進 産 園 公 内 案 化 石 油 和 平
問 答 心 配 子 壳 場 字 漢 料 理 主 着 新	戦 争 関 係 の 紹 介 経 済 律 薄 厚
古 持	回 起 頭 短 低 軽 洗 洋 別 幸 笑 泣
電 話 音 楽 歌 度 教 習 貸 借 送 強 勉 旅	静 由 増 減 倍 暖 適 当 政 美 連 絡
室 登	市 区 引 太 好 働 押 細 冷 寝 受 付
不 同 言 意 事 仕 病 院 医 者 堂 屋 用 有	飛 船 段 階 值 役 初 優 因 論 途 宅
店 民	声 暗 弱 遠 野 反 伝 若 両 遊 選 球
正 銀 図 館 道 動 建 特 終 駅 写 真 牛 員	育 温 燃 吹 落 届 賛 恋 庭 妻 夫 祖
林 森	京 私 乘 菜 定 記 雪 絵 消 奥 渡 助
	酒 吸 例 調 支 過 勤 貿 易 寄 様 感



田考親切試験部文歳留議散浴降 欲億 *one line = one unit	
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Table 4. List of all kanji in *Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū* textbooks

As seen from the analysis presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3, *Minna-no Nihongo* textbooks are not choosing and ordering kanji based on either frequency or JLPT levels, and they are not using componential analysis or visual similarity either. In other words, the basis for their choices in the ordering, especially in the second book, is unclear.

In the case of *Genki*, the whole list is displayed in Table 5. Even though in both textbooks the second book has more kanji, we can see that the first and second part of *Genki* are more balanced, while in *Minna-no Nihongo* the difference between the books is more noticeable.

<i>Genki 1</i>	<i>Genki 2</i>
一 二 三 四 五 六 七 八 九 十 百 千 万 円 時 日 本 人 月 火 水 木 金 土 曜 上 下 中 半 山 川 元 氣 天 私 今 田 女 男 見 行 食 飲 東 西 南 北 口 出 右 左 分 先 生 大 学 外 国 京 子 小 会 社 父 母 高 校 每 語 文 婦 入 員 新 聞 作 仕 事 電 車 休 言 謊 思 次 何 午 後 前 名 白 雨 書 友 間 家 話 少 古 知 来 住 正 年 壳 買 町 長 道 雪 立 自 夜 朝 持 手 紙 好 近 明 病 院 映 画 歌 市 所 勉 強 有 旅 昔 々 神 早 起 牛 使 働 連 別 度 赤 青 色 * one line = one lesson	物 鳥 料 理 特 安 飯 肉 悪 体 空 港 着 同 海 昼 彼 代 留 族 親 切 英 店 去 急 乘 当 音 楽 医 者 死 意 味 注 夏 魚 寺 広 転 借 走 建 地 場 足 通 供 世 界 全 部 始 週 以 考 開 屋 方 運 動 教 室 歳 習 主 結 婚 集 発 表 品 字 活 写 真 步 野 目 的 力 洋 服 堂 授 業 試 験 貸 図 館 終 宿 題 春 秋 冬 花 様 不 姉 兄 漢 卒 工 研 究 質 問 多 皿 声 茶 止 枚 両 無 払 心 笑 絶 对 痛 最 続

	信経台風犬重初若送幸計 遅配弟妹 記銀回夕黒用守末待残番 駅説案内忘 顔情怒変相横比化違悲調 査果感答
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Table 5. List of all kanji in *Genki* textbooks

Looking at the lessons in *Genki*, we can notice the influence of the compound principle, but there is also a significant influence of semantic grouping. For example, the directions (東西南北右左) are in the same lesson. However, this principle is more difficult to observe in the second book, where the compound principle becomes more relevant. In addition to that, even semantically grouped words, such as family members or seasons, are often scattered across the lessons. It seems that the *Genki* textbook improves very little compared to *Minna-no Nihongo* regarding ordering the characters unless the learner wants to learn kanji as vocabulary units. In conclusion, neither textbook does a particularly good job ordering the kanji, but the choice of kanji is decent and would likely prove useful for learners.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I tackled several different topics relating to kanji learning order. Firstly, I discussed the importance of frequency in choosing which kanji to learn first. The frequency score can be different in newspapers and magazines compared to literature or Twitter, and it may change through time. Therefore, various sources should be used to calculate the frequency when using it as a parameter in choosing which kanji to learn first and make sure that the resources are recent. The first criterion is more important since there was no significant change in frequency between the 1960s and 1990s. In the second section, I presented the recent research on kanji learning order by Paxton (2015) and Kandrač (2020, 2021). They use linguistic criteria to consider the optimal learning order but, due to the lack of computational methods, the lists are yet incomplete, and the contribution is, at the moment, mostly theoretical. In the third section, I consulted the computational approaches to kanji learning order. I found that the computational interest in kanji order originated in Chinese teaching, with ground-breaking algorithms by Yan et al. (2013) and Loach and Wang (2016). They propose using a

network approach and a topological sort algorithm to teach Chinese hanzi in optimal order. Even though theoretically impressive, both papers lack examples of practical application in learning, and their findings cannot be applied to the Japanese language in their entirety since they were working with Chinese hanzi. Shpika (2016b) attempted to apply the simplified version of the topological sort algorithm to sort Japanese kanji, using both the principle of frequency and the principle of “part before the whole”, which is the basis for topological sorting. However, the results of a purely computational approach in kanji ordering are difficult to apply in practice, because the resulting order completely lacks any semantic connection. Ideally, a combination of linguistic and computational approaches would yield better results, but it is debatable if one learning order would ever be optimal, since learners may have different goals.

In the fourth section, I described the concept of kanji learning cost. It was also introduced by Yan et al. (2013) in an attempt to evaluate their algorithm, and appended in a paper by Loach and Wang (2016). The learning cost is a measure that should represent how difficult it is to learn a hanzi or kanji, and it is calculated relatively easily using the metadata of kanji. In the fifth section, I proposed a method for calculating the learning cost of kanji, since the Japanese language is very different from Chinese, and therefore the same method cannot be applied. I argue that character readings, as well as character frequency, should be taken into account. Using the learning cost measure for evaluation could be circular, so I propose implementing this measure to assist in ordering kanji first so as to evaluate it empirically before using it as a measure of evaluation.

Lastly, in the sixth section, I analyze two very common Japanese language textbooks for beginner level: *Minna-no Nihongo Shokyū 1* and *2*, and *Genki 1* and *2*. I found that *Minna-no Nihongo* books cover 40% more kanji, but are less efficient in their choice regarding covering the most frequent kanji, as well as the characters included in the JLPT lists. Especially the second book was proven to be poor both in coverage and in balance compared to the first one. *Genki* textbooks are more efficient in their choices, there is more balance between books 1 and 2, and they cover beginner JLPT levels more. However, after analyzing the ordering of kanji between lessons, it became apparent that neither of the textbooks had a particularly good order. Both mix semantic principles with compound principles (teaching kanji which make up a common word together), but the semantic principle is not explored enough. They do not group kanji by components or visual similarity, leaving all the work of systematization to the learner or teacher.

In conclusion, learning kanji in the textbook order might be good for learners who aim to learn kanji as vocabulary units rather than a script.

Kanji learning order is a relatively new subfield of kanji teaching methodology, and it needs more theoretical and practical research. This work aims to open the discussion on the learning order and hopefully encourage more research on the topic.

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## **The Political Economy of ISA's Decision-making: The Case of the Residence Card Checker Application**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The newly-created Immigration Service Agency (ISA) has become the command centre for the implementation of the Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign nationals. In December 2020, the ISA launched a free application that allows for unrestricted verification of the authenticity of foreigners' resident cards. As a result, the Agency was accused of violating the privacy of foreign residents and of promoting racial divisions in society. Such development was opposite to the ISA's goal of building a society where foreigners can coexist more smoothly with the Japanese. This paper aims to evaluate the rationale of the ISA's policy-making process and clarify the controversies of policy implementation. The author argues that business lobbying plays a key role behind ISA's policy-making, and in consequence, the goal of multicultural coexistence remains difficult to achieve.

**KEYWORDS:** ISA, business lobbying, Residence Card Checker app, multicultural coexistence, policy-making

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## **Introduction**

In December of 2020, Japan's Immigration Service Agency (ISA) released a new Residence Card Checker application that allows confirmation of the authenticity of residence cards' held by foreigners living in the country. Due to many flaws of the app, its necessity and potential influence on Japanese society became the subject of a heated debate. The negative perception of the app, by Japan's foreign population and by academics, activists, or journalists, was rooted in the fear that the ISA, instead of fulfilling its role as the command centre for integrating foreigners into Japanese society, was actively contributing to deepening existing divisions and prejudices.

There is no doubt that adequate steps should be taken to stop a further increase in the number of forged resident cards. However, as the agency in charge of implementing the Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign nationals, the ISA should not endanger the well-being and security of foreign residents in the name of protecting the interests of Japanese business circles. An apparent conflict between the ISA's supervising and integrating responsibilities exposed the shortcomings of the Agency's capabilities and drew attention to calls for the establishment of a new agency which could undertake the task of integrating foreign residents into Japanese society more efficiently.

While the problem of the Residence Card Checker app may seem an isolated case of unfortunate policy decision-making, the author believes that, in reality, it is a part of a broader and much more complex issue of short-sighted and economically-driven immigration policy-making in Japan. For this reason, it is crucial to correctly comprehend the factors that influenced the launch of the app and to put it in a wider context of persisting patterns of decision-making behind Japan's immigration legislation. Only through a contextualised analysis of the launch of the Residence Card Checker app can some of the deeply-rooted reasons behind the shortcomings of Japanese integration policies be thoroughly presented, and potential solutions for overcoming the existing impasse and achieving a society of coexistence be presented.

### **1. The Status of the Residence Cards**

In July 2012, the Japanese government replaced the previously used alien registration system with a new residents' registration system (Immigration Service Agency Japan-e; Immigration Service Agency Japan 2013: 17).

Under this new programme, foreigners who stay in Japan for more than 90 days, with the exception of foreign officials and Americans with the U.S. forces agreement status (Status of Forces Agreement; SOFA), are issued Residence Cards, or Special Permanent Resident Certificates in the case of special permanent residents, by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) (Embassy of Japan in the United States of America 2019; Immigration Service Agency Japan-f; Immigration Service Agency Japan-g; Immigration Service Agency Japan 2013: 17–18; Social Democratic Party 2021). These documents include information such as the holder's name, date of birth, sex, nationality/region, address, validity period, and a face photograph for those over the age of 16. Additionally, resident cards include the status of residence, permitted period of stay, and eligibility for employment. The residents are required by law to inform the ISA about any changes in this information (Immigration Service Agency Japan-e; Immigration Service Agency Japan-f; Immigration Service Agency Japan-g; Immigration Service Agency Japan 2013: 18).

These cards serve as certificates proving the legality of one's residency status in Japan, their obtained employment permit, and their permitted period of stay. They are mainly used by foreign residents when leaving and re-entering Japan to confirm their status in the country and as proof of their re-entry rights. They are also used for various application procedures with ISA and address registration procedures at local municipal offices (Immigration Service Agency Japan-e; Immigration Service Agency Japan-f; Immigration Service Agency Japan 2013: 17; Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020c: 172–174).

What is more, foreign residents are required to always carry with them their resident cards, but not special permanent resident cards. They must present this document if requested by an immigration officer, immigration control officer, police officer, or other officials. If a foreign resident forgets to carry their resident card with them, they may be subject to a fine of up to 200,000 JPY. Moreover, if a foreign resident declines to present their card to the authorities, they may be fined up to 200,000 JPY and be imprisoned for up to one year (Immigration Service Agency Japan-a). According to Professor Suzuki Eriko from Kokushikan University, Japan is the only country in the world that requires only its foreign residents to constantly carry their proof of identification with them (Taiga Channel 2021a).

While officially there is no legal requirement for foreign residents to present their residence cards to anyone else than ISA's or police officers, many

employers and institutions, such as banks, hotels, mobile phone companies etc., require foreign residents to present this particular document on a daily basis as a means of identification during various formal procedures or applications. Due to a lack of clear official instructions from the ISA and characteristic for Japanese culture ambiguity, the legibility of such requests and the necessity to comply with them has remained a topic of debate among Japan's foreign residents' community (Kittaka 2020). The criminalization of not having one's residence card with them and the additional requirement by various organizations or institutions to present it in different situations, often without sufficient legal backing, negatively influences the quality of lives of foreign residents in Japan and leads to frictions between them and Japanese citizens (Harris 2021). While such documents as driving license, insurance card, or My Number Card are officially accepted identification documents in Japan, the requirement for foreign residents to present their resident card should be addressed by the ISA as part of their integrating policies. The author believes that clarifying the ambiguities regarding the role of the resident card as a form of identification would facilitate the everyday activities of foreign residents in Japan. It is the lack of such clarification that is the direct reason behind controversies regarding the Resident Card Checker app introduction by the ISA. The foreigners do not know their rights regarding resident cards, and in consequence, they can be easily forced into presenting it despite the lack of sufficient legal backing. If foreign residents were informed about conditions under which they are obliged to present their resident cards and when they can decline such requests, the Resident Card Checker app would pose a much smaller threat to Japan's foreign community.

## **2. Counterfeiting of Resident Cards as One of the Crimes Committed by Foreigners**

The number of foreign residents living in the country has been rising since the sudden drop in 2012, which was caused by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami crisis. According to the MOJ, between 2012 and 2019, the number of foreign residents in Japan rose from 2,033,656 to 2,933,137 people (an increase of 7.4% compared to the year before) (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020a: 27). While the ongoing increase in the number of foreign residents in Japan was a consequence of policy decisions under the second premiership of Abe Shinzō, due to a lack of sufficient public

debate, it led to fears about preserving the country’s racial homogeneity and social order (Su 2019; Tian and Chung 2018).

Although foreigners are responsible for about 1% only of all the crimes committed in Japan, Japanese media, right-wing politicians and groups exaggerate these crimes and present foreigners as criminals and an internal security threat. What is more, in Japan, crime is often regarded as something foreign, and public security is perceived as something originally Japanese. In consequence, a further increase in foreign population is viewed as a possible cause for future increase in crime rates, ethnic conflicts and riots (Morita 2017: 3, 6).

In recent years, the forgery of resident cards started to be perceived as an additional risk for the security of Japanese society. Between January and April of 2019, Japanese police raided factories of fake residence cards in Aichi, Osaka and Saitama prefectures (Iguchi 2019). It is commonly believed that such an increase in foreigners staying in Japan illegally and using forged documents may lead to a further increase in the number of crimes committed by foreign citizens (Nagayoshi 2020: 135, 137–138). According to the data provided by the National Police Agency (NPA), since 2016, an ongoing increase in the number of arrests based on violations of the Immigration Control Act can be observed . The same data shows that the number of arrests related particularly to illegal resident cards has also been increasing since 2013, reaching 790 cases in 2020 (see Figure 1; The National Police Agency 2021). Searches at some of the places counterfeiting resident cards found that more than a thousand fake cards could have been produced at each location (Japan Times 2020a; Wong 2019).

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Arrests	108	192	369	304	390	620	748	790
Charged suspects	78	122	250	219	266	438	564	579

Table 1: Changes in the status of arrests related to counterfeit residence cards (including their procuring, possession, acquisition). Source: The National Police Agency 2021.

The situation becomes even direr when the fact that the ISA estimated that on January 1, 2020, as many as 82,892 foreigners were overstaying their authorized period of stay in Japan is taken into account . This number represented an increase of 8,725 people (11.8%) when compared with the

numbers from the year before (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020a: 49). Furthermore, the MOJ estimates that most of those foreigners who are illegally staying in Japan are undertaking unauthorised employment activities. Still, it should be emphasized that the reasons which led to this situation are very complex and strongly related to decades of misguided immigration policy-making decisions that forced many foreign workers to undertake illegal employment activities in the country. According to the MOJ, the increase in the number of illegal foreign workers may have a negative influence on the Japanese labour market; however, the Ministry also admits that this situation may lead to various forms of human rights violations against illegal foreign workers (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020a: 59–62).

While the MOJ is right that foreigners working illegally in Japan may become victims of exploitation or violence, such risks are also often faced by those foreigners who work in Japan legally. It needs to be emphasized that many foreigners working in Japan legally, mostly as part of the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), also often become victims of various forms of extortion and human rights violations. What is more, it is often the lack of sufficient legal protection at legal workplaces that causes many foreign workers to leave their places of employment and to search for illegal work (Kikuchi et al. 2020).

Finally, it is true that despite the increase in the number of foreigners arrested for using or providing fake residence cards, these numbers remain significantly low when compared to the total number of foreign residents in Japan (Harris 2021). In spite of that, the author maintains that solving the problem of counterfeit resident cards by the ISA is important not only for the security of Japanese citizens but also for protecting the position and rights of foreign residents working legally in the country. The fact that counterfeiting techniques become more elaborate and efficient calls for a quick implementation of accurate countermeasures, which would once more make the resident cards a trustworthy identification document.

### **3. The App as a Tool in the Fight Against Counterfeit Documents**

As Suzuki Eriko points out, since 1999, the MOJ has been delegating the management or control of foreign residents to external institutions. For example, the employers or universities were obliged to inform relevant government institutions about the education or employment status of foreigners who were associated with them. She emphasizes that the ordinary

citizens were also included in the management and surveillance of foreign residents when, in 2004, the Immigration Bureau (reformed into ISA on April 1, 2019) created a website allowing them to report illegal residents either online or by phone call (Immigration Service Agency Japan-c, Taiga Channel 2021a). Next, after the introduction of the new resident card system in 2012, a website allowing for the verification of the authenticity of these new documents was created by the Immigration Bureau (Immigration Service Agency Japan-d, Taiga Channel 2021a). However, due to the improvements in techniques used for counterfeiting foreign resident cards, the website quickly turned out not to be a sufficient tool to guarantee the correct verification of the authenticity of documents (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020b: 130–131).

What is more, Suzuki also points out that private companies took advantage of this situation and developed their own software, meant for both computers and smartphones, allowing the verification of the authenticity of resident cards (Taiga Channel 2021a). Since 2013, the company Cyber Ware has been offering computer software reading the IC chip information of resident cards and other documents. The company presents its programs, ID Sakusaku 2 Lite and ID Sakusaku Standard, as products recommended for companies, universities, hotels, internet cafes, recycle shops, financial institutions, mobile phone companies, businesses requiring membership registration, rental stores, concert halls, live houses etc. In the case of resident cards, the software not only reads the IC chip information and presents it on the computer but also allows for checking the authenticity of the document based on the information obtained from the IC chip. A simpler version of the software, ID Sakusaku 2 Lite, is available for 24.000 JPY, with an additional annual maintenance service option for 2.400 JPY (Cyber Ware 2021). In 2016, Akiba Soft created a Resident Card IC Reader app which has become available for both iPhones and Android phones. The application reads the IC chips of both resident and special resident cards to confirm their authenticity. Additionally, personal data can be stored on the user's phone and accessed later. The app is available for 2000 JPY (Taiga Channel 2021a).

The ISA's Residence Card Checker app was released in December 2020 as an application allowing Japanese employers to verify the authenticity of documents (Debito 2020; Tokyo Shimbun 2021). The app is available for Windows PCs, Apple Macs, Android phones, and iPhones. It is available for free without any restrictions, and no special registration is required (Taiga

Channel 2021a). The Residence Card Checker app reads the content of the IC chip of a resident card and verifies the authenticity of the document and validity of the information stored on the chip (Taiga Channel 2021a; Tokyo Shimbun 2021). Using the data from the IC chips is an attempt to upgrade employers' ability to verify the validity of resident cards. The above-mentioned website introduced by the Immigration Bureau in 2012 allowed for verification of a card's authenticity by inputting its number and has helped for many years to detect even fake cards with well-imitated holograms (Japan Times 2020c). However, this method turned out to be insufficient due to the fact that the new types of counterfeit cards used the data from original residence cards, which allowed for outsmarting the system (Tokyo Shimbun 2021; Immigration Service Agency Japan-h). As a result, using the data provided on IC chips became the most accurate way of verifying the authenticity of resident cards because so far, there has been no case of an IC chip itself being forged (Japan Times 2020c). The Residence Card Checker app is relatively simple to use. After downloading and installing it on a device, the users can start using it for verifying resident cards. They need to input the card's number and then scan the IC chip with the NFC technology. If the card is scanned successfully, the digital version of the resident card is shown on the device (Immigration Service Agency Japan-h; Taiga Channel 2021a). The application confirms the authenticity of the card and provides all the same information that is presented on the document, including special permission for undertaking part-time employment, which is usually written on its back. It does not show any additional information about foreign residents (Taiga Channel 2021a).

While there exist in Japan other widely available applications allowing for the reading of IC chips from such documents as driving licence or My Number Card, none of these commonly available apps was created by an official government agency. What is more, these documents are protected by PIN codes assigned to them by their owner. In the case of the Residence Card Checker app, such security measures are much looser. While the ISA emphasized that the documents are also protected from being read without the owner's permission by a security code, in reality, the card number which is printed on it also serves as this code. This means that in the case of resident cards, this security measure functions more as a double-check option and cannot protect the card's holder from having their card scanned without their consent. Moreover, while the app does not allow for saving the read information, a screenshot of personal data can be taken without any

restrictions. In the case of a counterfeit card, there is no system of automatic notifications sent to the ISA or no obligation for the users of the app to contact relevant institutions. In such a case, only a request to contact a consultation counter is displayed in the app.

When publicising and promoting its app, the ISA explained that the reason behind the launch was to respond to calls from private companies which hire foreigners and struggle with confirming the originality of their residence cards. According to the Ministry, such calls intensified at the same time as the news about the increase in the number of arrests related to resident card forgeries (Taiga Channel 2021a). The Director of the Residency Management and Support Department, Kimizuka Hiroshi, said in an interview for *Tokyo Shimbun* that he did not want the app to be used for the wrong reasons and cause human rights abuses (Tokyo Shimbun 2021).

#### **4. The Debate over the App Launch**

The launch of the Residence Card Checker app generated interest and comments from the foreign population in Japan, Japanese opposition politicians, activists, academics and journalists. The controversy and concerns surrounding the app brought it to the attention of the politicians of the Parliamentary Committee on Immigration and Refugee Issues, which demanded an explanation from ISA's representatives about their policy decision-making. The talks took place during the committee's 24th meeting on June 15, 2021; however, due to the lack of sufficient data and satisfying explanations from the Agency's representatives, they were continued during the next 25th meeting on June 24, 2021. Both meetings were coordinated by Ishibashi Michihiro, the chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Immigration and Refugee Issues and a member of the Upper House from the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP). The ISA was first represented by Nishiyama Ryō, the Information Systems General Manager of the Immigration Agency, who was then replaced for the follow-up meeting by Kawabata Toyotaka, ISA's Inspection Planning Office Manager of the Residency Management Division. The concerns about the app were raised by, among others, Professor Suzuki Eriko from Kokushikan University who also serves as the Deputy Representative Director of the Immigration Federation, Torii Ippei, the Secretary-General of the Solidarity Network with Migrants Japan, politicians and journalists, including the outspoken Mochizuki Isoko (Taiga Channel 2021a; Taiga Channel 2021b).



During the meetings, the Residence Card Checker app was strongly criticised as posing a risk of human rights violations. Suzuki emphasized that, in her opinion, this app could cause further divisions in Japanese society. She claimed that the app not only did transfer the responsibility of surveillance of foreigners from the ISA to citizens but also introduced a strong division into two groups of those members of the society who are monitored and those who undertake the monitoring responsibilities. Suzuki was convinced that the launch of the app might cause an increase in discrimination and prejudice against foreigners in everyday life. She expressed her opinion that the app is proof of a lack of trust towards foreign residents, and its launch may serve as a validation of the prejudices and suspicions toward foreigners that have already existed in Japanese society. Suzuki strongly objected to the app and called for its withdrawal, arguing that it legitimizes mistrust towards the foreign residents and makes it impossible to achieve a society based on the coexistence of the Japanese and foreigners.

Many of the participants of the meeting seemed unified in their criticism of the unrestricted accessibility of the app and the lack of control over how it has been used. Mochizuki pointed out that it was hard to imagine that each of the 40.000 downloads of the app was done only by companies hiring foreigners. She called for limiting the accessibility of the app to the general public and for providing control measures over how the app is being used and by whom. Such comments were accompanied by calls for introducing at least basic rules explaining the conditions under which the app may be used, including its holder's approval.

What is more, many of the politicians and journalists strongly emphasized the weak position of foreigners in Japanese society. Yasuda Kōichi, a journalist specializing in labour issues, pointed out that the Agency must be aware of the fact that some Japanese citizens openly call for expulsion or even killing of foreigners living in the country. He emphasized that he is unable to comprehend how the ISA's officials, knowing about such realities, released the Resident Card Checker app without any restrictions or regulations. The participants expressed their worries about the app launch leading to new cases of extortions, human rights violations, discrimination, harassment, racial profiling, bullying of children, etc. It was Mochizuki who put the app launch into a broader perspective of unsuccessful immigration policies. She emphasized that the problem of forged resident cards is deeply rooted in the shortcomings of the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP)

established by the Ministry. She also accused the Agency of outsourcing its job to unqualified citizens instead of solving the problems that caused the situation in the first place.

On the other hand, for the ISA, the discussion became a chance to explain its reasons behind the launch of the app and to actively promote it as a tool for achieving a society of coexistence. It was easily noticeable that the Agency's representatives did not expect such harsh criticism regarding the app because they completely changed their arguments in the face of critical voices. During the first meeting, Nishiyama explained the Agency's reasons behind the app launch as related to the issue of an increased number of counterfeit resident cards. He emphasized the calls of industries employing foreigners for the Agency to introduce an app that would allow them to verify foreigners' resident cards and protect themselves from hiring an illegal immigrant or a person without an appropriate work permit. Nishiyama emphasized that the ISA decided to answer the needs of business representatives and launch its own official app, which would also serve as a countermeasure against the private apps used for the same purpose (Taiga Channel 2021a). However, during the second meeting, Kawabata presented entirely different reasoning for the launch of the application, claiming that, in reality, the app was created by the ISA for the benefit and convenience of foreign residents, who are now able to prove the authenticity of their resident cards in any situation. He argued that the implementation of the app was a measure for facilitating foreigners' everyday lives in Japan and for achieving a society of coexistence. He even denied the notion that the app was ever meant to serve as a tool for reporting forged cards. This, in turn, served for him as an argument to excuse the lack of data on the number of forged cards reported to the police or the ISA as a result of the implementation of the app (Taiga Channel 2021b).

Furthermore, Nishiyama admitted that at no point in the policy-decision process did the ISA take into consideration any potential harm or risk, such as a leak of personal information or harassment, that the app launch could cause to foreigners living in Japan. He also confirmed that the Agency did not consult lawyers or groups representing the interests of the foreign residents. Despite the criticism and calls for extensive consultations from the other participants, both bureaucrats emphasized that the ISA did not see the necessity for consulting the app with the public or foreigners' representatives. Moreover, they also strongly rejected the possibility of limiting the availability of the app or shutting the app down (Taiga Channel

2021a; Taiga Channel 2021b). Kawabata argued that the Agency's stand resulted from its resolve not to limit the chances for foreigners to take advantage of the app in their daily lives. Both bureaucrats did not see the app or the Agency's policy-making decision as a source of any potential problems. Nishiyama expressed his personal opinion that the card reader should be used with the consent of the card's holder only, and he did not see any risks of it leading to any potentially dangerous situations. While Kawabata admitted that using the app for any groundless checks of resident cards would be a crime, he expressed the opinion that any potential misuse of the app would not be caused by the shortcomings of the app itself but by the bad intentions and character problems of the people undertaking such attempts (Taiga Channel 2021b).

Still, Nishiyama and Kawabata agreed that some improvement might be appropriate. The former admitted that more explanations about the information included on resident cards or the information shown in the app should be added to the Residence Card Checker app to improve the understanding of the said information (Taiga Channel 2021a; Taiga Channel 2021b). Moreover, Kawabata suggested that, since some people are misusing the app, the Agency should undertake an internal debate and consider the implementation of better instructions and warnings regarding how the app should be used.

In conclusion, the discussion held with the ISA's representatives regarding the Agency's launch of the Residence Card Checker app was an important effort for voicing the concerns of Japan's foreign population and hearing the ISA's reasoning behind their decision. Unfortunately, the Agency remained strongly protective of its policy-decision and declined the possibility of opening itself for consultations. What is more, many of the explanations provided by the Agency's representatives were puzzling and contradictory, causing an impasse between the bureaucrats and other participants. The ISA was harshly criticised by the opposition politicians, including the committee chair Ishibashi or Ishikawa Taiga (CDP), who negatively evaluated the ISA's lack of willingness to open itself for consultations or to revise its policy. Politicians emphasized that as long as the ISA remains unwilling to listen to reports of violations caused by the app, it will never comprehend the nature and the extent of the issue. As a consequence, despite its own assurances, it will not be able to solve the problems caused by the app or prevent further escalation. They questioned the Agency's sense of responsibility and its attitude toward foreign residents (Taiga Channel

2021b). The Deputy Representative Director of the Immigration Federation Torii Ippei strongly criticised the ISA, accusing it of being disconnected from the reality and problems faced by foreigners living in Japan. Another of the participants called the ISA to fulfil its obligation of protecting foreign residents' human rights instead of simply policing them (Taiga Channel 2021a).

Although the issue of the Resident Card Checker app may seem to be an isolated case of questionable policy decision-making, in reality, it is a problem that is deeply rooted in the context of the ISA's establishment and its role as the coordinator responsible for implementing the Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign nationals [*sic!*] into Japanese society. For this reason, the author believes that to better comprehend the influences behind the launch of the app and its significance, it needs to be analysed from a broader perspective of immigration policy-making in Japan.

### **5. The ISA's Role in Achieving a Society of Coexistence**

In 2018, the Immigration Act Amendment which introduced a new visa category of Specified Skilled Worker (i) and (ii) (respectively SSWI and SSWII) was passed through the Diet (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020b: 84–86). It was accompanied by additional legislation that introduced changes in the responsibilities and the structure of the MOJ. In consequence of these reforms, from April 1, 2019, the Immigration Bureau, originally one of the internal departments of the MOJ, was transformed into MOJ's external agency under the name of the Immigration Services Agency (ISA). The Ministry and the new Agency became responsible not only for immigration control but also for the successful implementation of the new SSWI and SSWII visa program, and implementing fair management of foreign nationals' residency (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2019: 3, 88–89). Since the government assumed a significant increase in the number of foreigners working in Japan due to the new visa categories, the ISA was to undertake the task of accurately responding to this increase, and to plan, draft, and coordinate the development of the environment for acceptance of foreign nationals. Together with the transformation of the Immigration Bureau into the ISA and the increase of its responsibilities, its budget and number of staff were increased (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020c: 200–205).

Due to the fact that the introduction of comprehensive measures for better inclusion of foreign residents into Japanese society is one of the ISA's

various responsibilities, the original purpose for the launch of the app, included in both the ISA's promotional materials and Nishiyama's initial explanation, that emphasized the needs of the business circles contradicted the Agency's official role. For this reason, it is understandable that during the 25th meeting of the Parliamentary Committee on Immigration and Refugee Issues, the Agency's officials explained their reasons behind this policy event as part of their integration measures where the app was to serve foreigners to improve their everyday lives in Japan.

It should be emphasized that the ISA's role as the command centre for introducing policies aimed at supporting foreigners living in the country is of great significance due to the fact that creating an efficient policy to include foreigners into Japanese society has been a challenge for the last 20 years. First attempts were undertaken in 2000 when the Second Immigration Control Basic Plan emphasized the role of foreigners as part of the society and pointed out the necessity of introducing comprehensive administration of foreign residents (Kajima Institute for International Peace 2020: 57). Next, in 2006 the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (MIC) created a Model Plan for the Promotion of Intercultural Cohesion (*tabunka kyōsei*; Kondo 2015: 159). This policy presented an attempt at assimilating foreigners into Japanese society by educating them in the Japanese language, social norms and culture so that they do not cause any friction with the Japanese majority. Instead of creating an environment for the coexistence of foreigners and the Japanese, it established an unequal relationship between them by putting the foreigners in a very disadvantaged position and not protecting them from discrimination (Morita 2017: 3, 7–8).

Despite that, *tabunka kyōsei* remained the main integration policy for more than ten years. It was as late as 2018 when, together with the amendment of the Immigration Law and the introduction of new visa categories, preparing different integration measures was deemed necessary as part of the efforts to face the challenge of the foreseen increase in the number of foreign workers. The MOJ was named the command centre for developing the environment for acceptance of foreign nationals and for coordinating cooperation with the related ministries, agencies and local governments in order to achieve these measures. To be able to do this, the Ministerial Conference on Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign nationals was established to conduct a government-wide study on the necessary measures. According to the ISA, opinions of both Japanese and foreign residents were used to prepare procedures for responding to their needs, promoting human

rights awareness and creating a society where its members support each other (Immigration Service Agency Japan-b: 33). The results of the conference's deliberations were presented on December 25, 2018, as the Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign nationals, which were further revised in 2019 and 2020 (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020b: 92).

As many as 191 measures were introduced to achieve the goal of accepting foreign nationals in a way that would contribute to the realization of a society where the Japanese and foreigners can live safely and comfortably. They included the creation and subsidisation of one-stop consulting counters in the buildings of local governments to provide foreigners with better access to information or advice regarding such issues as residence procedures, employment, medical care, welfare, childbirth, child care, or child education, and to help create inclusive local communities. The ISA also started to cooperate with the local governments by assigning Accepting Environmental Coordinators to the Regional Immigration Services Bureaus. These officers are responsible for achieving a society of harmonious coexistence of the Japanese and foreign residents by listening to opinions of various actors of policy-making, public organizations and local governments, and implementing these opinions to improve the environment for foreign nationals (Immigration Service Agency Japan-b: 3–34; Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020b: 92–96; Public Relation Office Government of Japan 2020). The coordinators are also responsible for supporting local governments in establishing and operating consultation services for foreign residents. The officers are sent to one-stop consulting counters upon requests from local governments to provide information and training. The ISA also prepared a cross-governmental “Guidebook on Living and Working” in Japan for foreigners in 14 languages and “plain Japanese”. It provides basic information on residence procedures, labour-related laws and regulations, social insurance, crime prevention, traffic safety etc. The Agency believes that the Guidebook includes information on how to have both a safe and secure life and work in Japan. Moreover, the ISA established the Plain Japanese Guidelines for Supporting Foreign Residents to promote providing information to the foreigners by the national government, local governments, and other institutions in so-called “plain Japanese” (Immigration Service Agency Japan-b: 32–35; Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020b 95–96). Simultaneously, the necessity of increasing the amount of comprehensive information for foreign residents was emphasized, and an

increase in the amount of available information regarding administrative procedures in various languages was deemed necessary. Dictionaries, websites, manuals, guidebooks, leaflets, teaching materials, audiovisual materials etc. in 14 foreign languages and “plain Japanese” were to be prepared for administrative procedures, natural disasters, traffic safety measures, driving license procedures, responses to accidents and incidents, opening bank accounts, renting housing or signing a contract for mobile phones. Moreover, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) was put in charge of improving Japanese language education for foreign residents. The Ministry has been working on ensuring education opportunities for foreign children, improving the qualifications of Japanese language teachers, and creating evaluation standards for Japanese communication skills in the working environment (Immigration Service Agency Japan-b: 32–35). Finally, on July 6, 2020, the Foreign Residents Support Center (FRESC) was opened in Tokyo. The ISA wants the FRESC to support foreign residents and help to develop the environment for acceptance of foreign nationals. Ministries, agencies, and other organizations, including the Tokyo Regional Immigration Services Bureau, Japan Legal Support Center or the Human Rights Department of Tokyo Legal Affairs Bureau, use the FRESC to provide consultations to foreigners. The FRESC also organizes workshops for local government staff members. The Public Employment Security Office, hoping to improve the foreign students’ chances of finding employment, also uses this centre to hold briefings, workshops and other events for those interested in working in Japan (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020b: 97).

While being in charge of introducing such an elaborate integration policy, the ISA declines to open itself for consultations with foreign residents’ representatives, and it remains unwilling to acknowledge potential risks and divisions that the Resident Card Checker app may bring to society. Since the app may negatively influence ISA’s official goal of integrating foreigners into Japanese society and creating better conditions for them, it should be the Agency’s priority to accept feedback and adjust its policy decision.

## **6.The App as a Tool for Achieving a Society of Coexistence**

Officially, by implementing the Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign nationals, the ISA is responsible for actively improving the lives of foreign residents in Japan and for achieving a society of coexistence for the Japanese and foreigners. However, due to the lack of

an open and honest public debate about immigration and inclusion of foreigners into Japanese society, the official discourse still tends to emphasize the virtues of a homogeneous national community and exaggerate the dangers that diversity could pose to the country's social stability and national security (Tian and Chung 2018).

The goal of achieving a peaceful coexistence seems to remain quite far-fetched when frequent news reports on discrimination are taken into consideration (Japan Times 2019) or racist attacks faced by foreign residents (Kunizaki 2021). Moreover, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic made the situation even more difficult for foreigners living in Japan. For many months after the outbreak of the pandemic foreign residents were barred by the Japanese government from re-entering the country while its citizens remained able to return to their homeland. This distinction put many of Japan's foreign residents in a difficult situation and left them unable to reunite with their families or return to their homes and jobs. Such an approach by the Japanese government was difficult to comprehend for Japan's foreign community, particularly due to the fact that other developed economies treated their citizens and long-term foreign residents equally during this crisis (Osumi 2020). What is more, those foreign residents who remained in Japan became the subject of intensified discrimination and increasing numbers of hateful remarks due to the spread of the virus (Japan Times 2020b). There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively influenced the situation of foreigners in Japan and made achieving a society of coexistence even more difficult than before. It would seem that under such circumstances, the ISA should undertake attempts to ameliorate the worsening situation. However, as if not comprehending the gravity and complexity of the situation, the Agency made the policy decision of introducing the Resident Card Checker app, which only increased the feeling of alienation among the foreign population (Harris 2021).

The foreigners expressed their disbelief and disappointment in the ISA's policy and voiced their fears that the app may cause further divisions and strengthen discrimination against foreigners. Fears for the safety of foreign and bi-racial children were especially strong (City Cost 2021; Tokyo Shimbun 2021). The foreigners emphasized those risks that making the app available to the general public may pose to them. While no one can question the necessity for the government to find a way to enable employers to confirm a foreigner's work legibility, foreign residents perceived the ISA's measures against resident card frauds as out of proportion. Because of



Japan's notoriously low level of digital security, additional concerns were raised regarding the insufficient security measures of the app (City Cost 2021; Harris 2021; Social Democratic Party 2021). Furthermore, due to the fact that the ISA promoted the app with the use of promotional posters placed at Tokyo's train stations, fears that it was advertised to the Japanese as a tool available to them for surveillance over the country's foreign population were also expressed (City Cost 2021).

Unfortunately, the launch of the app seems to have caused new divisions between Japanese citizens and foreign residents. The two groups often clashed on various forums regarding their perception of the app. The ISA itself actively influenced the fierce argument between the two groups by advertising the app on their official Twitter account. The lack of appropriate moderation of the discussion that occurred as a response, and many hateful comments towards Japan's foreign population that were posted, further worsened the situation<sup>2</sup>.

While it may seem puzzling why the ISA introduced a policy that instead of serving its goal of achieving the society of coexistence has negatively influenced the lives of Japan's foreign residents, the author believes that it is more appropriate to regard this policy as a part of business-oriented immigration policy-making patterns that have prevailed in the country since the 1990s.

## **7. Changes in the Patterns of Japanese Policy-Making**

The case of the Resident Card Checker app may seem like nothing more than a controversial, insufficiently thought-through policy initiative. However, such an assumption would be an underestimation of the complexity of the problem behind this policy decision. Based on her research, the author argues that the launch of the app is an example of a typical Japanese process concerning immigration policy decision-making, which remains deeply rooted in the ritualised relations of the so-called iron triangle and serves to protect the interests of its members.

For years the policy-making in Japan has remained a constant interest of academic research due to its ongoing adaptation to the changing circumstances of Japanese society. Traditionally, the core of Japanese

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<sup>2</sup>The original tweet by MOJ promoting the app launch caused a fierce discussion between Twitter's users who were deeply divided in their opinions regarding the Agency's policy initiative ([https://twitter.com/MOJ\\_IMMI/status/1342328564255866882](https://twitter.com/MOJ_IMMI/status/1342328564255866882)).

policy-making consisted of the so-called iron triangle, which described the interdependency between Japanese politicians, business groups and bureaucrats. The power balance between these groups has changed many times throughout the years as it was influenced by introduced reforms and changes in Japanese society and by the strong personalities of some politicians (Mulgan 2000: 183). Through the years, the introduced reforms increased the prime ministers' influence on the decision-making process and provided them with the tools necessary to effectively undertake independent policy initiatives (Curtis 1999: 23). Still, the reforms themselves were insufficient to guarantee a strong top-down leadership by the prime ministers and, until 2012, Koizumi Jun'ichirō was the only politician who was able to efficiently use these tools to his advantage and to become a strong leader behind policy-making (Zakowski et al. 2018: 30, 233, 238; Zakowski 2021: 11, 51–52).

Since his first time in the office, Abe's ambition was to follow in Koizumi's steps. However, during his first premiership, he was unsuccessful in repeating Koizumi's efficiency, and there was little hope that his second attempt could be anything different (Carpenter 2008: 28). Despite that, the policy-making under the second premiership of Abe Shinzō presents itself as extremely interesting compared with his predecessors. Abe's second premiership, which started in December 2012 and lasted until September 2020, is regarded as an example of an extraordinary concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister's closest entourage, the so-called Kantei, and Abe's unprecedented prime ministerial policy initiative (Mulgan 2018: 2; Zakowski 2020b: 175). It is believed that Abe, with great support from his Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide, exerted unique control over the bureaucracy, his party and the business circles, taking prime-ministerial leadership and the policy-making initiative to a new level (Liff 2018: 13; Mulgan 2018: 48; Zakowski 2021: 91, 96). It is believed that the changes introduced by Abe decreased the influence of bureaucrats and backbenchers on policy-making and allowed for a more unified leadership and a more efficient decision-making process (Zakowski 2021: 11).

During his second premiership, Abe's economic agenda, commonly known as Abenomics, and strongly nationalistic security policies were his most famous policy initiatives. The policy-making patterns behind these agendas were usually described as Kantei-leadership. This term refers to Abe's unified entourage's general tendency to decide and successfully push through their policies without any significant challenge from other policy-

making actors of Japanese policy-making (Harris 2020: 189; Mulgan 2018: 33; Zakowski 2021: 15, 57). Abe's strength in policy initiative was based on changes in the power balance within the iron triangle. Abe and his Kantei managed to push its other members out to the periphery of policy-decision making, alternating the traditional exchange patterns between them. The author believes that, while there is no doubt that Abe's second term in power was characterised by unprecedented Kantei-leadership, it did not cause the disappearance of the iron triangle's structure from the policy-making process. It is true that under Abe's strong leadership, the interdependencies between the members of the iron triangle were weakened to the extent that allowed the Prime Minister to bypass parts of this over-complicated structure or even use it to his advantage. However, since Abe did not manage to make these interdependencies disappear completely, the interests of the groups which constitute the iron triangle were still able to strongly influence some of Abe's policy initiatives.

### **8. Political Economy of Immigration Policy Decision-Making**

The 2018 Immigration Act Amendment is an example of how strongly the iron triangle was able to shape Abe's policy agenda. During Abe's second time in the office, the question of foreign workforce appeared relatively often as part of Abenomics and his efforts to fight labour shortages (Jones and Seitani 2019; Kohata 2018; Milly 2020; Nikkei Asia 2017; Nikkei Asia 2018b; Takao et al. 2018; Takenoshita 2016; Tian and Chung 2018; Tobita 2018; Vogt 2018). However, Abe's legislation concerning foreign workers remained biased, benefitting primarily the interests of Japanese employers, and it was not comprehensive enough. While economic reasons led Abe to facilitate working in Japan for some groups of foreigners, incorporating them into Japanese society was hardly part of his agenda (Takenoshita 2016: 106). The 2018 Immigration Act Amendment can be regarded as part of Abe's entourage's efforts to answer the needs of those Japanese businesses which were struggling due to labour shortages (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2019: 3, 41–44). It introduced a new visa program for Specified Skilled Workers (SSW) to allow foreigners with certain skills and professional experience to work in 14 Japanese industries for a restricted period (Hamaguchi 2019: 3–5). This new Amendment was supposed to provide work visas for as many ca. 350,000 low-skilled workers, mostly in agriculture, construction, lodging, shipping and nursing industries till the end of 2025 (Jones and Seitani 2019: 41; Tian and Chung 2018).

The author believes that the 2018 Immigration Act Amendment presents an extremely interesting case of decision-making patterns under Abe's leadership. When analysed in detail, the decision-making process of the Amendment proves the strength of the unified Kantei. In record time, Abe, with strong initiative from his Chief Cabinet Secretary (CCS) Suga, was able to push the reform through the relevant organs of the policy-making process, successfully overcoming the opposing voices (Aizawa 2019; Akashi 2019; Burgess 2020; Hashimoto 2019; Johnston 2018; Mainichi Japan 2018a; Mainichi Japan 2018b; Murakami and Osaki 2018; Osaki 2018; Sankei News 2018; Schwarcz 2018; Steger 2018; Tamura 2018; Walia 2019; Yoshida and Murakami 2018). On the other hand, this case of the policy-making process also proves the existence of strong influences from other members of the iron triangle, who aimed at protecting their respective interests. In short, the 2018 Immigration Law Amendment was originally initiated by the representatives of SMEs, who approached CCS Suga asking for his support in solving labour shortages. After having the issue researched by his subordinates, CCS Suga decided on the necessity for such reform and became its main supporter (Marutani 2018).

While the reform was meant to protect the interest of the business circles, the author also believes that it gained the approval of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) because of a strong relation to the interests of many LDP politicians. Most importantly, the LDP politicians were quickly convinced to support the reform because it protected the interests of business circles in their constituencies, on whose support they strongly depended during the elections (Aizawa 2019; Marutani 2018; Nikkei Asia 2018a; Shigeta 2018a; Shigeta 2018b; Yokota and Fujita 2019). What is more, some of the LDP politicians and their family members have been profiting from the existing TITP visa program (Idei 2019: 271–272; Yasuda 2010: 76–77, 79). It is a complicated scheme that allows for employing foreign workers in some industries with support from various middleman organisations required by law. These organizations, including, for example, the Supervising Organizations, profit from fees collected both from Sending Organizations and from accepting industries and foreign workers (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2019: 51). Due to the fact that some of the LDP politicians are said to be involved in these Supervising Organizations, the new SSW visa program presented them with additional opportunities for increasing their profits (Idei 2019: 271–272, 280). Since the new SSW program was created as a build-up or extension of the TITP program, it requires its

participants to rely on middleman organizations such as Registered Support Organizations (Burgess 2020; Obe 2019). The initial phase of the program's implementation showed that many TITP's Supervising Organizations applied for permission to function as Registered Support Organizations of the SSW program as well. Knowing that the LDP politicians profited from the TITP program, it is understandable why the 2018 Immigration Act Amendment presented a chance for them to use their policy influence to protect their interests (Idei 2019: 280).

In addition, this amendment also became a chance for the bureaucrats themselves to not only protect their interests but also increase their power even further. As it was previously mentioned, to gain the support of the Immigration Bureau's officials, it was decided by the administration to level up this internal organ of the MOJ to a new external agency of the MOJ under the name of Immigration Services Agency. The change in status was accompanied by an increase in the Agency's budget. Furthermore, CCS Suga entrusted the coordination and details of the 2018 Amendment to the bureaucrats from the MOJ. They were responsible for shaping both the core of the reform, which was hastily passed through the Diet and many of its details, which were established later by additional legislation (Hamaguchi 2019: 3, 5; Mainichi Japan 2018a; Osaki 2018; Pesek 2018; Schwarcz 2018). During Abe's second premiership, Kantei or organs under its direct control usually were the most important decision-makers behind the details of introduced policies. However, the 2018 Immigration Act Amendment presents a case clearly showing that in some policy domains, bureaucrats were allowed to exercise their traditional influence and shape policies as long as they did not challenge Kantei's interests. Moreover, it should be emphasised that the introduction of both the TITP program and the new SSW visa scheme required establishing many additional institutions and organizations. Such new organizations as Japan International Trainee & Skilled Worker Cooperation Organization (JITCO) and Organization for Technical Intern Training (OTIT), which were established as supervising institutions in the TITP, turned out to become additional arenas for the bureaucrats to increase their influence and profits. Bureaucrats are not only dispatched to these organizations as part of their work but also employed by them during their retirement as part of the Amakudari system (Idei 2019: 268, 270–271). For this reason, it is expected that the details of the 2018 Amendment, which were decided by the bureaucrats and which introduced the requirement of relying on such organizations as Registered Support

Organizations, may protect the bureaucrats' interests even further by providing them with additional places for exercising their Amakudari practices (Idei 2019: 280). Furthermore, JITCO itself also became responsible for supervising, promoting and facilitating the SSW visa scheme, thus increasing its influence and profits (JITCO 2021: 2). Moreover, bureaucrats traditionally cultivated close relations with industry representatives because private companies often provided them with additional places to undertake profitable employment after retirement (Zakowski et al. 2018: 28). It may be suspected that also during the policy event of the 2018 Immigration Act Amendment, the MOJ bureaucrats had more to gain from supporting the interests of business circles than from trying to oppose it. Finally, just like some politicians, some bureaucrats profited from being members of TITP's Supervising Organizations. Since the new Registered Support Organizations are perceived as potential sources of financial profit for the politicians, it may be expected that bureaucrats could also take advantage of this new opportunity (Idei 2019: 271, 280).

Understanding the policy-making network behind the 2018 Immigration Act Amendment allows for a better comprehension of the actual influence behind the Resident Card Checker app policy decision. The author believes that the available information, such as the Agency's initial explanations, promotional content, or advertising posters, clearly prove that the app launch was just another policy event where immigration legislation was shaped according to the interests of relevant business groups. This is why the ISA did not see, until now, the need to conduct consultation with the groups representing the interests of foreign residents in Japan who are most affected by the release of the app. Such an attitude is not an exception, but continuity in the reasoning behind immigration policy-making decisions that can be observed not only as part of Abenomics but also as an ongoing tendency, which started in the 1990s.

The legislation concerning foreign workers under Abe's second premiership remained biased, serving mostly the interests of Japanese employers and rarely protecting the basic rights of Japan's foreign population. The author believes that due to the fact that these policies were often motivated by short-sighted economic goals and were placed under the conservative control of the MOJ's bureaucrats, they remained insufficient and inadequate measures for answering Japan's labour shortages problems. What is more, without establishing non-discriminatory and employee-oriented legislation, it is

impossible to attract larger numbers of foreign workers that are necessary for the revitalisation of Japan's stagnant economy. As long as policies related to foreign workers remain a patchwork of temporary solutions and lack a far-reaching vision based on respect and inclusion, they will not become a positive contribution to the Japanese economy in the long term. Since the successful integration of foreign workers into Japanese society seems to be a significant factor in improving Japan's economic performance, it is crucial that the ISA's role as the coordinator behind achieving a society of coexistence be evaluated in detail and revised depending on its results.

### **9. In Search for a New Approach**

While Japan has been suffering from a decrease in population and workforce, foreigners have become more and more present in different areas of the Japanese economy (Tian and Chung 2018). Japan's immigration system evolved over decades in response to labour shortages. Although labour migration was not officially permitted, various new visa types and specific work programmes were introduced to allow for an inflow of foreign labour force (Jones and Seitani 2019: 43). An ongoing increase in workforce demand led to further relaxation in immigration policies that allowed foreigners to undertake different forms of employment in Japan (Milly 2020). The government estimates that labour power will further decline to around 58 million in 2030 (Kato 2018; Nagata 2019). For this reason, the 2016 Japan Revitalization Strategy presented by the Cabinet Office emphasized the importance of foreign talents in economic recovery (Tian and Chung 2018). To better solve labour shortages, in 2018, Prime Minister Abe instructed the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy (CEFP) to review the system of acceptance of foreign workers (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2019: 36). Foreigners were deemed necessary for developing the vitality of the Japanese economy and society (*ibid.*, 38–39). As a consequence of all these changes, in 2019, the number of foreigners living in Japan reached 2.9 million (an increase of 7.4% compared with the year before). The increased number of foreigners in Japan is a cultural and sociological challenge for Japanese society. While the foreigners living in the country comprised only 2.32% of its population in 2019, the impression of a sudden increase in foreign presence was strengthened by massive numbers of foreign tourists that have visited Japan in recent years (Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020a: 27). This unprecedented increase in the number of foreigners living in or visiting Japan led to a

discussion over racial homogeneity and the preservation of the social order (Tian and Chung 2018). What is more, arguments that an increased number of foreign workers could influence domestic unemployment or push down the wages of unskilled Japanese workers made the immigration debate almost taboo (Kato 2018; Tian and Chung 2010). Foreign workers are regarded as temporary residents, not legitimate members of society, and remain marginalized and excluded from the society (Takenoshita 2016: 109). As a result, politicians, including Prime Minister Abe, worried about possible public discontent with an increased presence of foreign nationals in the country and emphasized their resolve not to embrace more open immigration policies (Burgess 2020). Despite that, to answer the problem of shortages in the workforce, the government decided in December 2018 to introduce a new residency status. The intention behind it was to bring to Japan the foreigners who possess a certain amount of skills or allow participants of TITP to extend their stay and help decline low-skilled labour shortages. It was expected that the program, which started in April 2019, would bring in as many as almost 350,000 workers during the next five years after its implementation (Jones and Seitani 2019: 41). However, at the end of 2019, only 1621 new visas were granted, of which 90% of applicants participated in the TTIP program (Burgess 2020; Immigration Service Agency Japan 2020c: 209).

It has been more than 20 years since Japan started to build up its patchwork of policies for providing cheap labour to local companies. While it is important to answer the needs of Japanese businesses that have been struggling with finding employees due to a serious decline in the working-age population, the low number of foreigners deciding to use the existing programs to work in Japan, as well as various human rights violations clearly show that the current pattern of short-sighted immigration policy-making has not been fulfilling its purpose. Still, finding a more appropriate policy program for bringing foreign workers to Japan remains a difficult and far-fetched policy goal. In the meantime, despite the government's official rejection of the idea of opening Japan for foreign labour migration, in reality, foreigners have already become part of the Japanese labour market and society. It is important to appropriately manage and support those workers who are already contributing to the Japanese economy by legally working in the country. In this context, the significance of the ISA's role as the command centre for integrating foreigners into Japanese society becomes even more crucial. Still, the Agency's recent policy decision to launch the



Resident Card Checker app, together with its lack of remorse over the death of Wishma Sandamali in Nagoya's detention centre, show that the ISA is far from becoming able to undertake the mission of positively influencing the integration of foreign residents into Japanese society (Kitano 2021). Such cases force us to consider the validity of calls for the establishment of a new, separate agency that would become responsible for supporting foreigners living in the country (Ibusuki 2020: 26).

Despite the official narrative presented by Japanese politicians, Japan has already become a country with an existing foreign community. For this reason, the question that Japanese society needs to answer is not whether to accept foreign workers. The choice that Japan is facing now is whether it will continue to treat these foreigners as disposable workers or whether it will become a more inclusive society that respects the basic rights of all its members.

## **Conclusion**

For decades accepting foreign workers has been a challenge for both Japanese politicians and society. The lack of honest and open public debate has negatively influenced the image of foreign workers among the Japanese. However, despite the reluctance of Japanese decision-makers to admit it, the foreigners have become significant contributors to the Japanese economy and important members of its society.

As a result, immigration became the core interest of various academic research. Still, while there exist many different approaches to analyse this issue, the author believes that researching the policy-decision process behind Japan's immigration policy-making allows for deepening the understanding of the immigration problem itself. The policy event of the ISA's launch of the Residence Card Checker app shows how the interests of various actors of policy-making may influence even a seemingly meaningless policy decision. Its analysis has put into light the profound and complicated connections between separate immigration policies. For this reason, the author believes that it is not possible either to accurately evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the immigration policy decisions or to propose possible adequate solutions to the problems faced by Japan's foreign residents without the correct understanding of the powers influencing said decisions.

For this reason, the author strongly argues for further research on Japanese immigration and integration problems from the policy-making perspective.

The recent criticism of the ISA due to the death of Wishma Sandamali, initial reform promises from the Minister of Justice Kamikawa Yōko, and criticism of the TITP program by Kōno Tarō, a prominent LDP politician, suggest that immigration and integration policies may once again become the subject of significant reforms. And while understanding the complexity of the interests behind these policy domains puts into question the possibility of seeing sudden and significant positive change, the increase in public interest in Japanese immigration and integration policies that can be observed since 2018 may become an increasingly significant factor behind the future developments.

**Abbreviations:**

CEFP – Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy

CCS – Chief Cabinet Secretary

CDP – Constitutional Democratic Party

FRESC – Foreign Residents Support Centre

ISA – Immigration Service Agency

JITCO – Japan International Trainee & Skilled Worker Cooperation Organization

LDP – Liberal Democratic Party

MEXT – Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

MIC – Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication

MOJ – Ministry of Justice

NPA – National Police Agency

OTIT – Organization for Technical Intern Training

SMEs – Small and medium-sized enterprises

SSWI – Specified Skilled Worker (i)

SSWII – Specified Skilled Worker (ii)

SOFA – Status of Forces Agreement

TITP – Technical Intern Training Program

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