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IMMIGRATION AS A SOLUTION TO THE AGEING POPULATION IN JAPAN: A SWOT ANALYSIS

Bachelor's thesis

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This paper explores the use of immigration as a strategy for dealing with an aging population in the Japanese context. The thesis analyzes the demographic situation of Japan and the current Japanese immigration policy. The aim of the thesis is to create a SWOT analysis , identifying the strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats of this approach.

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Declaration

I declare that I have prepared this thesis independently and have listed all sources and literature used.

In Olomouc ……

Signature

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Abstrakt

Tato práce se věnuje využití imigrace jako strategie pro řešení stárnoucí populace v japonském kontextu. Práce analyzuje demografickou situaci Japonska a současnou japonskou imigrační politiku. Cílem práce je následné vytvoření SWOT analýzy neboli identifikování silných a slabých stránek a zároveň příležitostí a hrozeb tohoto přístupu.

Klíčová slova: migrace, SWOT analýza, Japonsko, stárnutí populace

Abstract

This thesis explores the use of immigration as a strategy for dealing with an aging population in the Japanese context. This thesis analyses the demographic situation of Japan and the current Japanese immigration policy. The aim of this thesis is to create a SWOT analysis, identifying the strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats of this approach.

Key words: migration, SWOT analysis, Japan, ageing population

Author's notes:

- Japanese words and names are Romanised according to the rules of the Hepburn transcription, with the exception of commonly used forms of names such as *Tokyo* or *Osaka.*
- Japanese personal names are written in the order of first name followed by surname.
- In in-text citations of Japanese sources, the Romanised or English equivalent is used. In addition, if the source is any of the Japanese ministries (that are mentioned more than once), the in-text citation uses the abbreviated version. For example, instead of (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2022) the (MHLW, 2022) would be used. This is to ensure better reading flow for the reader.
- For the Japanese sources in the bibliography, the author's name is either Romanised or the English equivalent is used, the same as with in-text citations. The rest is left in the Japanese alphabet. This decision was made to ensure the accuracy of the source.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MHLW	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare
MIC	Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
SSW	Specified Skilled Worker
SSWP	Specified Skilled Worker Programme
TTIP	Technical Intern Training Program
WEF	World Economic Forum

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

This thesis tackles the topic of the ageing population in Japan. The goal of it is to create a SWOT analysis, identifying the strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats of using migration to solve the problem of the ageing population in Japan. The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part are contextual chapters and the second part is dedicated to the SWOT analysis.

In the first part, I proceed as follows. I begin by examining Japanese demographics and the effects of an ageing population on a nation. After concluding that an ageing population has overall negative effects, I move to consider the range of possible solutions a nation can take to address an ageing population. I identify both direct and indirect solutions. Since the indirect solutions do have a positive effect but are not capable of actually solving the problem alone, I turn to the direct solutions, which do aim to substantially ameliorate the problem. From the available options, I provisionally conclude that increasing immigration is the most promising choice.

In the second part, I consider whether increasing immigration would ultimately be a useful solution for addressing Japan's demographic crisis, I carry out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. A SWOT analysis is a methodological tool used to analyse whether any particular strategy should be applied. While it has its origin in the private sector, in business, to evaluate potential business decisions, recently, the SWOT methodology has been used in the public sector, by governments, to evaluate potential political strategies. After carrying out a thorough SWOT analysis, I conclude if, on balance, Japan would benefit from increasing immigration and under what conditions.

1 AGEING POPULATIONS

As of 2025, several news sites have published articles about how Japan has hit new negative demographic records. There are reports about record-low live births estimated at 727,277 births in 2023, from which we can derive a fertility rate of 1.2, the lowest in Japanese history (Yeung, 2024). Other reports write of a record-high percentage of elderly people as a proportion of Japanese society (defined as people aged 65 years or older), reaching over 29% this year, making Japan the country[1] with the highest percentage of elderly population in the world (Butts, 2024). These reports are alarming but not at all surprising, as Japan has been battling an ageing population for some time with abundant media and academic coverage. Japan isn't the only country with such a problem, though, as ageing populations plague a plethora of developed countries, such as Germany, Italy, and Finland (Richter, 2023). But what makes a population an ageing one and why is it considered a *bad* thing?

There are many definitions of what an ageing population is. For example, Uhlenberg (2009) defines it as a shift in the age distribution of a population towards people of older age. The age defining a person as old differs between sources. The two common age thresholds are 60 and 65 years. In this thesis, I will be working with the age threshold of 65 years since that is the age used to define the elderly by the government of Japan. In the following subchapter, I will present the Japanese demographic information pertaining to the phenomenon of an ageing population.

1.1 DEMOGRAPHICS

As mentioned previously, an ageing population means the share of elderly people growing as a proportion of the whole. Based on the final estimated population data given by Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) over the last two decades, we can observe that the share of the 65+ population increased from 21.9% of the total population in 2008 to 29.2% in 2024 (see Figure 1). This is a 29.5% increase from 28 million people of old age to 36.25 million people of old age in just 16 years. With this change comes an increase in mean age[2], median age and modal age. The median age group shifted from 40–44 years to 45–49 in 2011, and with the modal age group being 50-54 in 2024, the Japanese population is steadily becoming older on average (MIC, 2024a).

[1] Japan has the highest percentage of elderly people among countries with over 1 million in population.
[2] In this thesis I refrain from calculating the mean age, as available data for accurate calculation are unavailable.

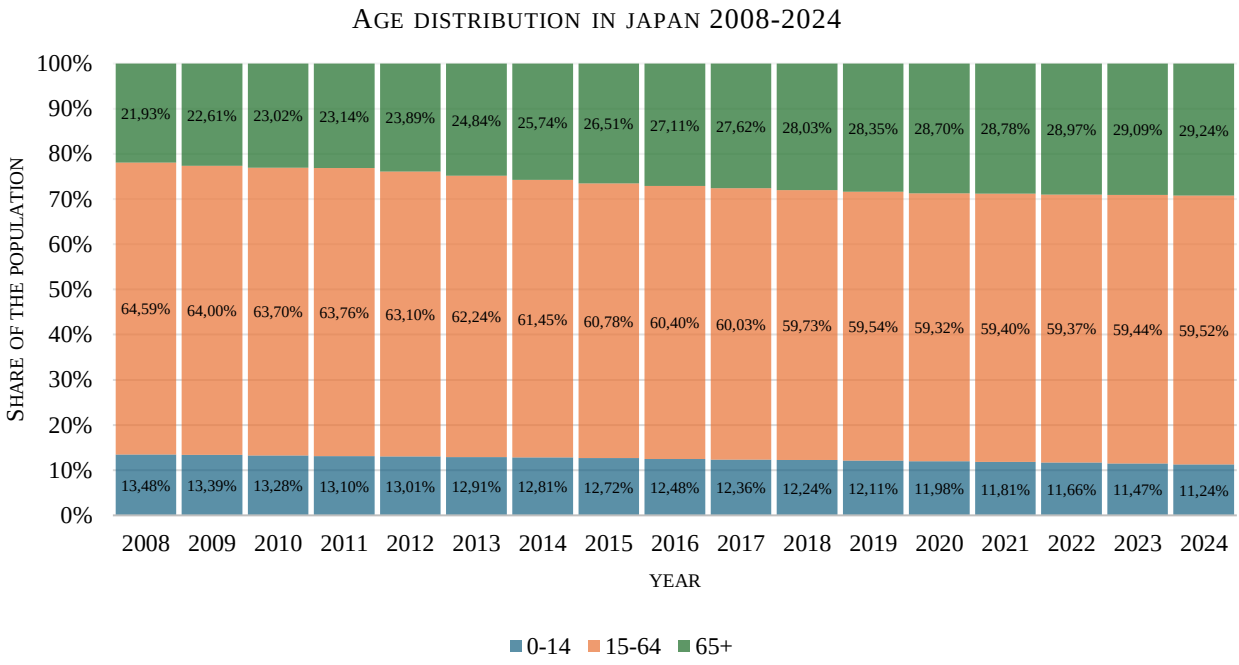

Figure 1: Age distribution in Japan 2008-2024; created by me **Data:** MIC (2024a)

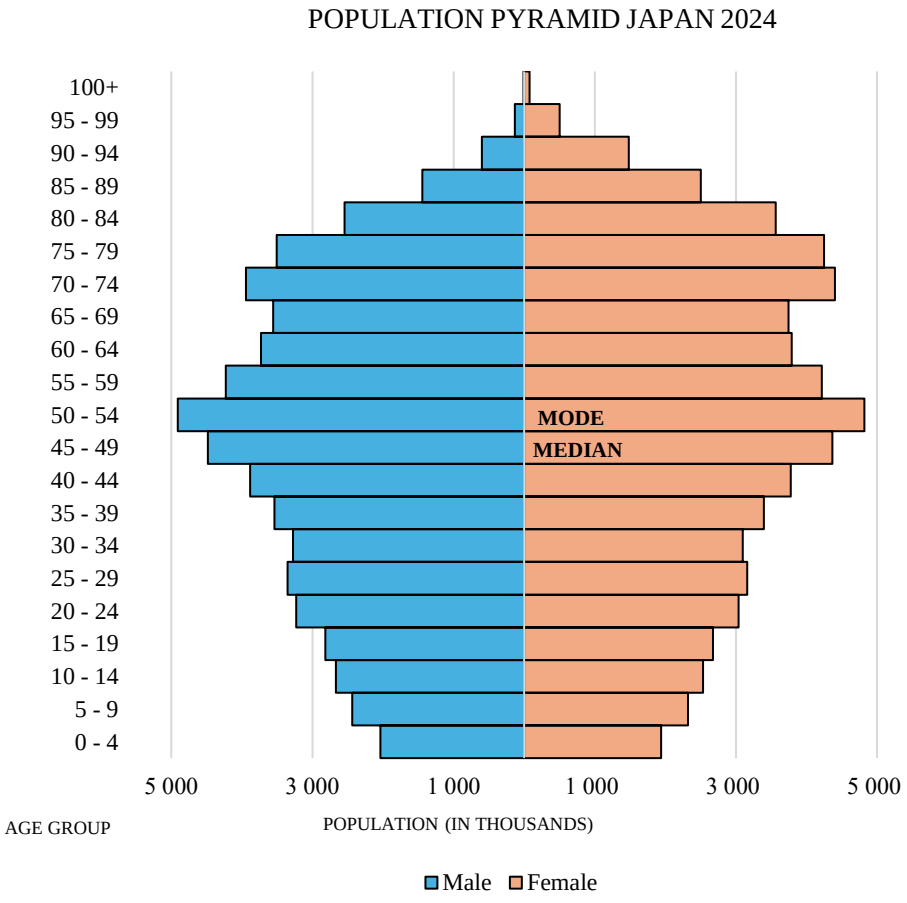

Figure 2: Population Pyramid Japan 2024; created by me **Data:** MIC (2024a)

The fact is even more apparent when we look at the age pyramid graph (Figure 2). An age pyramid with a constricted shape hints at a society that has high life expectancy, aka low death rates in this case, and low birth rates, far below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), Japan has been below the replacement level since the Japanese second baby boom[3] and since the first oil crisis in 1973[4], making it a half-century-long decline (MHLW, 2023a).

The numbers are even more dire when focusing on the native Japanese population only (total population − immigrants), as the median age group moves up to 50–54 years old, instead of the 45–49 age group for the total population. In addition, the Japanese who are 65+ years old make up 29.9% of the native population, in contrast to the 29.2% for the total population, including immigrants.

With this 0.7% difference, it seems *prima facie* that including the foreigners doesn't help to lower the share of the elderly in any significant way. We have to keep in mind that the share of immigrants in Japan remains quite low compared to other similarly developed countries. According to the Immigration Services Agency (ISA), immigrants in Japan made up only 2.7% of the total population in 2023, with 3.4 million (ISA, 2024a). In comparison, the share of the migrant population (one or two parents without German citizenship) in Germany in 2023 was around 28% (Statista, 2025), as the countries adopted different migration strategies. The difference between these countries is not only in the share of foreign population and migration policies but also in their composition, as Japan's immigrants are mostly from other Asian countries. The most notable group are the Chinese, taking up more than 24% of the total immigrant numbers. Other major source countries are Vietnam, South Korea, the Philippines, Brazil, Nepal, and Indonesia (ISA, 2024a).

Other than the share of the elderly and migrant numbers, the distribution of people in Japan is also relevant. In Japan, 92% of people are classified as urban, and the number is still rising. Together with a shrinking population, Japanese rural areas are facing complete depopulation (Dilley *et al.*, 2024). According to MIC, areas that suffer from depopulation account for only 9.3% of Japan's population but also account for over half of the number of municipalities and

[3]Period, when the people born after World War II, the so called baby boomers, started having their own children.

[4]During the oil crises in the 1970s, the price of oil skyrocketed. It especially hit countries like Japan, which are dependent on imported oil and petrol. The economy slowed down and inflation rose sharply, making it harder for people to have children.

63% of Japan's area (MIC, 2024b). The primary cause of the population decline is the migration of young people to urban areas in search of work and education (Ochiai, 2023).

With the migration of young people, the share of elderly people in rural areas has naturally risen. The share climbed from 6.7% of elderly people in the 1960s (when a notable depopulation of rural areas began) to 39.7% in 2020 (MIC, 2024b). When we compare the 39.7% to the 28.7% share of elderly people across the whole of Japan (in 2020), we can conclude that rural areas are not only depopulating but are at the same time rapidly ageing, with this ageing accelerating beyond the country's average because of said depopulation.

I have now shown the current demographic data, with the pertinent details being Japan's increasing share of elderly people compared to a relatively small share of immigrants. Such a population structure has implications and poses risks for future growth, as I will explain in the next section.

1.2 THE RISK OF AN AGEING POPULATION

In this section, I explain why ageing populations are a bad thing and present their adverse effects. I will divide the adverse effects into economic effects and social effects. At the end of the section, I will briefly explore the opportunities and possibly positive aspects of such a demographic shift.

1.2.1 ECONOMIC EFFECTS

A population's growing share of old people raises the old-age dependency ratio. The dependency ratio is the number of people aged 15–64 years divided by the number of children and pensioners, defined as people aged 0–14 and people aged 65+. The dependency ratio shows a ratio of dependent people who don't contribute economically and have to be taken care of (children, seniors) by the economically productive population. To show the burden of ageing populations, a version called the old-age dependency ratio is used, which focuses solely on the burden of the elderly, omitting children. The old-age dependency ratio is calculated as the number of people who have reached the pension age of 65 divided by the working-age population.

Japan had an old-age dependency ratio of 50.1% in 2023, which was the highest ratio in the world (excluding city-states). Ot the other hand, economically similar Germany had a ratio of 36%, much lower than Japan (UN World Population Prospects, 2024). A high dependency

ratio suggests that the working-age population bears a heavier burden in supporting and funding the lives of the elderly. Therefore, it is viewed as unfavourable and carries several economic implications.

Firstly, such a ratio will lead to lower tax revenues. People of old age don't pay as much tax as working-aged people (less taxable income, lower consumption, and thus also lower consumer tax), so an increased share of them will lead to lower tax collected (Dougherty, de Biase and Lorenzoni, 2022). This might, in turn, raise taxes (such as income tax) as the government will put the burden of paying the deficit on the economically active working-age people, which will lower people's disposable income. Disposable income is an important driver in economic growth as people spend more on goods and services (Xueqin Wang, Yuyao He, and Meng Yang, 2017), stimulating the economy (Fang, 2024).

In Japan, there seems to be a contrary trend *vis a vis* this point about raising taxes, as Japanese politicians have instead recently been debating raising the tax threshold. The income tax threshold sets the point at which income starts to get taxed. Income below the threshold doesn't get taxed, so a raise in the threshold means more take-home pay for workers and less tax revenue for the country. Why would a country with a big debt problem want to lower its tax revenue? The answer will become clearer when we consider my next point.

Secondly, the high old-age dependency ratio hints not only at a relatively growing share of elderly people but also at a relative shrinking of the working population. In practice, this translates to worker shortages. The aforementioned tax threshold raise was intended to alleviate such shortages as part of an economic stimulus package. Some part-time workers (especially students) have a psychological barrier to working more hours because the over-the-threshold income they receive gets taxed (NHK World-Japan, 2024). In Japan, the labour shortage has become a serious problem for small and medium-sized enterprises, especially because they are more likely to go out of business or go bankrupt. The Japanese MHLW identified three areas that suffer the most: construction, transportation and postal services, and medical and welfare (MHLW, 2022a). Another sector where there is a severe lack of workers is the tertiary service economy, like the hotel and restaurant industry. A toll has also been taken on agriculture due to the depopulation of rural areas.

I will highlight the problem by focusing on the example of medical workers, which is particularly apposite. Some scholars like Takami *et al.* (2024) and Tsukada (2024) talk about the dire lack of medical staff and long-term care workers. This shortage of medical staff is especially problematic concerning our topic here because, on average, older people require

more medical care and long-term care. In this case, the ageing population creates a negative cycle, where fewer workers are available, while more workers are needed. When comparing Japanese labour shortages to the rest of the world, Japan's situation stands out negatively. In 2019, 88 % of surveyed employers in Japan declared having difficulties hiring, compared with 59.5% on average across the OECD countries surveyed (OECD, 2024).

The next point I will talk about is higher government spending. More elderly people means more pensions will be needed, which means the share of government expenditure on pensions will rise, putting a strain on already debt-ridden Japanese accounts. Some of that spending might be reallocated from different sectors, such as education (Gonzalez-Eiras and Niepelt, 2012). One thing is clear: more funds will be needed to support the rising percentage of the elderly who cannot support themselves anymore, or, on the other hand, benefits for the elderly will have to be reduced.

In addition to pensions, the government will have to put more resources into healthcare. Countries with rapidly ageing populations may face an increasing prevalence of disease, especially because of non-commutable diseases, such as cancer, stroke, cancers and mental disorders. Such a rise poses a problem as the treatment of such diseased people requires much time and care (Bloom, Canning and Lubet, 2015). According to the MHLW (2023b), over 60% of medical care spending was spent on people aged 65+ in 2023.

With such demographically induced challenges, many predict the slowing of economic growth. Hirai and Okamoto (2023) highlight the need to address the ageing population, as, the way things are going, healthcare expenditure will continue to rise even if the GDP decreases, posing a threat to ageing countries.

1.2.2 SOCIAL EFFECTS

The effects of an ageing population are not only economic but also social. A lot of the duty for caring for an elderly person falls on their family. As a person ages, their physical and mental state naturally declines. I have mentioned non-commutable diseases such as strokes or mental disorders. For example, among 165 European non-governmental organisations that work with elderly people, Alzheimer's disease was identified as one of the most common problems (Rogers, Sánchez-Querubín and Kil, 2015). Alzheimer's disease is a genetic and neurodegenerative disease that causes memory impairment, and patients with such a disease need constant care and attention (Knopman *et al.*, 2021).

This, and many other age-related illnesses, places immense pressure on family members and friends caring for those with such conditions. And as a person's medical needs grow, caregivers face a greater burden of responsibilities and challenges (Culberson *et al.*, 2023). People must often split their time between their work, ordinary family responsibilities, and caring for their elderly family members. Such a load of responsibilities might lead to sustained physical and mental stress, which could end up as a contributor to the carer's own condition worsening (Luichies, Goossensen and der Meide, 2021). We also have to consider the fact that with ageing populations, the family carers will often end up being elderly themselves, with children aged 65+ having to take care of their 80-90-year-old parents. With the younger share of the population shrinking, the next generation of carers will be much smaller in size, leaving many elderly people without the help of their younger family members.

This can lead to loneliness, social isolation and even lone deaths. In Japan, the number of single elderly persons' households has been rising. The Japanese Cabinet Office (2024) predicts that by the year 2040, 26% of elderly men and 29% of elderly women will live alone, compared to 15% of men and 22% of women living alone in 2020. Loneliness and isolation can lead to a worsening of people's mental and physical states and pose a risk to public health.

Apart from the strain on their family carers and public health, the growing percentage of the elderly as a share of the Japanese population might change the political landscape. Elderly people vote differently from young people. They also have a much higher electoral participation rate, and with their growing numbers, their outvoting other age groups is thus very likely. Research suggests that older people tend to vote more conservatively, in that they are often loyal to the parties they voted for in the past. They prefer voting for healthcare policies and are less likely to vote for educational policies (Vlandas, McArthur and Ganslmeier, 2021). Such voting patterns might have a negative effect on younger generations as their voting power diminishes in comparison. This is because younger voters personally benefit more from a focus on education, while older voters personally benefit more from a focus on healthcare.

1.2.3 POSSIBLE POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Not all assessments of the future of nations with ageing populations are negative, as an ageing population can also bring some positive developments. Some scholars like Healy (2004) view such demographic changes as a mere transition and not a crisis. The transition will most likely lead to more elderly people remaining in the workforce, bringing value to their communities by passing on their experience (Stoodley and Conroy, 2024). It will also indirectly

stimulate some innovation in the fields of medicine, care, infrastructure and communication technologies (Obi, Ishmatova and Iwasaki, 2013).

The area of robotics especially offers innovative solutions as the ageing population drives new technological development. Robots could be the answer to labour shortages in the future, as well as contributing to the enhancement of the mental and physical well-being of the elderly. For example, the robot *Paro* was developed in Japan at the turn of the millennium to help dementia patients. This therapeutic robot with the appearance of a baby seal offers patients relief from mental stress and improves their quality of life (Wang, Shen and Chen, 2022). Such technology is not only limited to helping the elderly, as there are confirmed positive effects on children with autism, for example (Veronesi *et al.*, 2023). In the future, ageing population-driven innovation could greatly improve the health and care sector for all.

However, even though there are some opportunities that an ageing population brings, on balance, the effects are undesirable overall. The negatives outweigh the positives, and my provisional conclusion is that Japan must specifically address its demographics by increasing the overall population share of working-aged people in relation to the share of elderly people.

2 SOLVING AGEING POPULATIONS

In the previous chapter, I presented the adverse effects that the demographic shift brings. There are several ways to try to combat them. Either we try to change the shape of the demographic pyramid itself, or we need to try to tackle the adverse effect of population ageing by focusing on the effects themselves. In this part, I will present such solutions and then look at the current Japanese approach and policies.

2.1 STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE THE EFFECTS OF AGEING POPULATIONS

Strategies to change the shape of the demographic pyramid can be divided into three kinds: those that focus on death rates, those that focus on birth rates, and those that focus on immigration. Strategies that aim to address the problem indirectly by ameliorating negative effects can be divided into two kinds: innovatory and participatory. I will discuss all of these topics in turn.

I take death rates first, e.g. how many of the elderly population are dying, and at what age. A preliminary point we can take up and set aside is the prospect of the elderly share of the population itself shrinking. The share of elderly people rises with lower death rates and longer life expectancy. As the medical field innovates and care offered rises in quality, people's lives are prolonged, as many diseases become treatable or more manageable. Some people can live 50 more years after becoming an elderly person at 65, which is as many years as one is considered economically active. Shortening a person's life when they get 'too old' as a means to stop a population from ageing is presumably unethical and therefore not considered a viable solution. However, milder forms of such suggestions and sentiments, that instead indirectly focus on how much we should do to *prolong* life, exist in the minority in Japanese politics and are even more prevalent in other nations.

For example, the former Japanese prime minister *Tarō Asō* created a controversy in 2013 when he proclaimed that old people should "hurry up and die" and that he would feel bad for receiving end-of-life care on government money while remarking on Japan's ageing population (McCurry, 2013)[5]. It should be noted that his position is an outlier, as euthanasia is uncommon

[5] Such ideas have also been explored in literature and pop media. For example, a novel by the name of *Ginrei no hate* 銀齢の果て by *Yasutaka Tsutsui* presents a reality where the ageing population is solved by elderly people fighting each other to death to secure their spot in society.

in Japan, and unlike in some other nations (e.g., the United Kingdom), there has been no formal move to promote or allow euthanasia (Rough *et al.*, 2025). So, these sentiments notwithstanding, it seems we must conclude that there is no plausible prospect of the elderly share of the population shrinking and that, since there are many factors that are causing average age of death to rise in Japan, and little support for any measures against this, a longer-lived and healthier elderly population is here to stay. Therefore, the only way the elderly share of the population can be modified is by increasing the working-aged share of the population.

This brings us to our second strategy, which is the promotion of an increase in birth rates. The share of elderly people grows in comparison to the diminishing share of people born, and vice versa, so a rise in birth rates would slow down population ageing. People in developed countries usually tend to have fewer children on average, as birth control is readily available, quality childraising is very costly, and women have children later in life due to education and career opportunities (El-Ghannam, 2005). A birth rate-based policy to fight ageing populations would need to incentivise families to have children by lessening the costs of such. This can be achieved by fully paid maternity leave and paternity leave, job security for mothers, tax breaks, income equality and government transfers. The demerits of this approach are that a rise in birth rates will not likely increase enough to make significant changes in the demographic structure, and even so, it would take decades to do so (Berkel *et al.*, 2004).

The third way to influence the shape of the demographic pyramid is by increasing migration. People migrate for different reasons, and they can migrate alone or with their families. Most people migrate in their productive years, and they find a job, produce goods, and pay taxes in the destination country. A Migration-based policy tries to make a country a good destination for migrants by loosening its borders and simplifying its bureaucratic processes around obtaining the right to reside and work in the country. Migration, compared to birth-based policies, can have a bigger impact on the old age dependency ratio in less time since the new arrivals immediately enter the workforce. It can also temporarily raise birth rates, because migrants from less developed origin countries tend to have more children, which continues, in lesser effect, in the next generation of migrants (Grytten, Skau and Sørensen, 2024).

Other strategies don’t deal with changing the demographic structure itself, but instead indirectly deal with ameliorating the problem by mitigating the adverse effects of ageing populations. One of the most common strategies is by raising the participation of elderly people in the work force. This would mean raising the retirement age and enabling them to find work suitable for their skill and age. The government would get more tax from their income, and

labour shortages wouldn't be as great (Ivanova, Balaev and Gurvich, 2017). Also, continuing to work in their later years would help give elderly people a sense of purpose and a feeling of being needed, which would help them fight depression and loneliness. It has been shown that continued work has a positive impact on maintaining health (Minami *et al.*, 2015) and therefore makes it a good thing to include this strategy in the fight against ageing populations.

Another indirect strategy might be innovation – taking human labour out of labour shortages. So instead of raising effectiveness through elderly participation, one would raise effectiveness through automation.

My preliminary conclusion is that, out of the three direct strategies, an increase in immigration is the most promising and feasible. I think that while the indirect strategies are certainly relevant, they should be understood only as a supplement to a solution rather than a comprehensive solution in themselves.

2.2 JAPANESE POLICY

I will now turn to describe what Japan has actually done in relation to the above points. Japan is one of the countries with the most aged populations in the world and is well aware of this fact. In recent years, many policies and plans have been proposed. Since I previously considered and discarded a strategy focused on death rates, in this section I will discuss how Japan has chosen to implement birth rate policies, participation policies and innovation policies, before turning to particularly focus on the Japanese attitude towards promoting migration as a solution to the ageing population, since I previously concluded that indirect strategies alone were not sufficient, and that out of the possible direct strategies, migration was the most promising.

Firstly, I will present the Japanese birth rate-based policies. *Shigeru Ishiba*, the current prime minister of Japan as of October 2024, named falling birthrates as one of the top priorities he will be tackling during his time in office. He proposed to continue enforcing the policies of former prime minister *Fumio Kushida*, especially the policy called *Children's Future Strategy* (JapanGov, 2024). In this policy, a need to financially support families with children is recognised. For example, the government-issued allowance for families with children is raised and prolonged to children of high school age. Extra support is offered to families with more than 3 children (MHLW, 2023c). Another aim is to lower the burden of medical costs related to bearing a child and childbirth. The policy also recognises that one of the strongest deterrents to having a child is high education costs. Tuition-free education is provided to families with three

or more children, as well as paid enrolment fees (MHLW, 2023c). Steps were also taken to strengthen co-parenting, as fathers often don't spend as much time with their families due to long working hours for men compared to women. These changes will increase child-related spending by 3.6 trillion yen, approximately 0.6% of GDP, by 2028 (IMF, 2024). The *Children's Future Strategy* builds upon the *Basic Act on Children,* which the Diet adopted in 2022. This Act strengthens children's rights and highlights the need for further child-related policies (e-gov, 2023).

Secondly, Japan is also focused on increasing the participation of the elderly in the workforce. The elderly population in Japan represents a huge pool of human capital, especially in rural areas, where the share, and therefore the effects, of an ageing population are even more pronounced. Increasing participation of the elderly in the workforce could help mitigate the effects of labour shortages.

This strategy is also strengthened by the fact that many senior Japanese employees do want to continue working. Unfortunately, they are often met with fewer work opportunities and lower pay (Tochibayashi and Ota, 2024). The Japanese government is well aware of this fact and aims to build an environment where the elderly can fully utilise their skills and desire to work by ensuring the stability of their employment. Several policies have been formulated to ensure such a result. Companies are required to continue employing or rehiring (creating a new work contract upon reaching 60 years of age) senior workers until the age of 65 and are obliged to make their best effort to employ workers until the age of 70. The mandatory retirement age has also been abolished, and the decision to continue to stay in employment is instead based on the wishes of workers. These changes have been implemented by the revision of the Act on *Stabilization of Employment of Elderly Persons*, which became effective in 2021, with a 4-year transition period that will conclude by the end of March 2025 (MHLW, 2021).

The new changes aim to help elderly people to stay in the workforce, gain purpose and earn additional income. However, a new challenge has arisen within the rehiring plan, as it involves a steep wage loss for the same amount of work. A survey by the MHLW found that the average wage for individuals aged 60 to 64 is about 20% lower than the wage of those aged 55 to 59 years. When focusing on rehired workers, a Cabinet Office survey from March of last year revealed that 45% of respondents reported earning about 30% to 40% less than their pre-retirement wages (Fukuda, 2025). And the workload doesn't seem to diminish, especially in sectors with labour shortages. Labour policy researcher *Keiichiro Hamaguchi* explains that in Japan, the wage doesn't reflect the amount of work, rather, it reflects human criteria such as age

and length of service (Ozawa, 2023). These unresolved issues make such policies unsustainable on their own.

Thirdly, innovation has been on the rise in Japan. I have already briefly talked about *Paro,* the therapeutic robot seal, in section 1.2.2. *Paro* is far from the only robot designed to ease the burden on medical and care workers. Japan is the leader in the design of such technologies, as it has a serious labour shortage in the care sector. In April 2018, the MHLW created the Office for Nursing Care Robot Development and Promotion (Ide *et al.*, 2021) to further promote the development of such technologies. Other than *Paro,* several other robots are notable, like *Hug* and *Pepper*. *Hug* is a robotic lifting assistant aimed at alleviating the burden of lifting from the care workers themselves, and *Pepper* is a semi-humanoid robot able to recognize emotions and designed to engage patients (Wright, 2023).

As much as there is hope for such technologies, there are also doubts. There have been concerns about the effectiveness of some of the projects and the value they bring to the care sector (Hsu *et al.*, 2020). Some home-care professionals spoke negatively of the use of technological solutions. Concerns were voiced, as robots don't offer needed human contact. Human contact, warmth and the relationship between the carer and the patient are immensely valuable to a person's well-being (Ide *et al.*, 2021). Robots also need to be maintained and transported around, so the burden put on human labour isn't much smaller. This is why robots alone cannot yet solve the care crisis in Japan, and thus, this strategy also cannot stand alone but can only take a supplementary role at most at this time.

Fourthly and finally, I now turn to describe Japan’s prior and current approach to migration. Japan first allowed immigration after the opening of the country in 1853. The immigration from this point up until the end of World War II was not as controlled, and many people immigrated to or emigrated from Japan. Japan’s first introduced official policy on immigration was The Immigration Control Order in 1951, which very strictly controlled migration. It was then replaced by the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act in 1982. Under this new law, the status of refugees was recognised in reaction to the Indochina refugee crisis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no date). Since the 1980s, migration to Japan has increased significantly, but there is a consistent preference to let in only high-skilled migrants. From the initial opening of Japan in 1853 until 2019, only three ways to migrate to Japan as a

low-skilled worker were possible. Firstly, since 1867, immigrants of Japanese descent[6] were allowed to return. Secondly, foreign students have been allowed to study at Japanese universities since 1881 (Tran and Jin, 2021). Thirdly, in the 1990s, so called technical trainees were given permission to enter (Chiavacci, 2024). I will specifically focus on this example in the next paragraph.

At the end of the 1980s, a discussion between the now MHLW and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) took place. The MHLW held a restrictive view of immigration (Wakisaka, 2024) and wanted to establish a permit system in which employers wanting to employ foreign workers would need to obtain a special permit to do so. The MOJ was opposed to such, and so, as a compromise, the Technical Intern Training Programme (TITP) was established in 1993. It allowed for foreign workers to come and work in Japan, and after reaching the end of the programme, they would need to return to their home countries. This complicated 2-year and then 3-year programme consisted of two phases. The first phase a foreign worker would spend as a trainee (not classified as a worker) and the second as a technical intern (classified as a worker). The work conducted was, in reality, no different during the two phases, leading to the programme being revised. This resulted in a revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, which granted a new residence status to TITP workers. Under the new status, TITP workers would be fully protected by labour laws (Park, 2021).

The discourse about the TITP can be divided into two sides. The first one talks about TITP as a well-functioning system that mitigates labour shortages and allows workers to acquire skills and apply them in their home country upon their return. The second one talks about the TITP as an exploitative system that allows human trafficking and exploitation of the workers despite the protection of their residence status (Chiavacci, 2024). The programme was designed to avoid granting permanent residence to foreign workers as well as controlling the amount of entries allowed, and so reflects the Japanese reluctance to integrate and host migrants long-term (Igarashi and Nagayoshi, 2022).

Japan started to slightly open its borders to more migrants in 2019, as a new programme called the Specified Skilled Worker Programme (SSWP) was launched. Under this new system, Japan's labour market opened to new categories of migrants, including those without higher education. This programme issues visas for 14 sectors, including agriculture, elder care, and

[6] Immigrants of Japanese descent are called *Nikkeijin.* Brazil has the largest population of Japanese descent outside of Japan. Japanese people migrated to Brazil in the first half of the 20th century to work at plantations. Many Japanese Brazilians returned to Japan after finishing their contracts and, due to their Japanese heritage, received better treatment as an immigrant.

construction, which were previously thought of as unskilled or semi-skilled. There are two types of SSWP workers: type SSW I and type SSW II. Type SSW I workers have to pass the Japanese language proficiency test, as well as a designated skill exam to show that they possess necessary occupational skills in order to be allowed to work in Japan. The length of this visa is 5 years without the option to prolong it and without the option of bringing any family members. The TITP workers can transition into the SSW I type, and the SSW I workers can transition into the SSW II type. In order to apply for permanent residence, one must live and work in Japan for 10 consecutive years. The SSW II type visa is renewable and thus allows workers to meet this requirement. Another benefit is that holders of SSW II visas can bring their family members with them (OECD, 2024).

Transitioning into the SSW II can be difficult, as workers need to pass an examination and show an expert level of knowledge and skill in their field. Only two sectors were initially allowed for the SSW II visa: construction and shipbuilding. As of 2023, 9 additional sectors have started offering SSW II visas (ISA, 2023). The number of workers with SSW I visas in 2023 was 283,634, and the number of workers with SSW II visas was only 832. The number of SSW II workers who are allowed permanent residency is very small compared to the size of the Japanese Population. Before the addition of the extra 9 sectors offering this visa, only 12 people in Japan were able to obtain the SSW II visa (ISA, 2024b).

Transitioning from the TTIP to the SSW I visa is possible, but the programmes don't fully match in terms of covered sectors. Because of this, alongside the criticism of the TTIP, a new programme was agreed upon by the cabinet in February 2024. The new programme is called the Employment for Skill Development Programme, and it will fully replace the TTIP in the future (MOJ, 2025).

Unlike with low-skilled workers, Japan has consistently taken a proactive approach to welcoming highly skilled foreign professionals. In 2012, a points-based system was established. A person collects points according to his degree, work experience, age (the younger the more points one gets) and annual salary. If the amount of 70 points is maintained for 3 consecutive years, the highly skilled worker can apply for permanent residence in 3 years compared to the 10 years otherwise required. If the number of points is 80, the worker can apply for permanent residence after only one year. An international student studying in Japan can work part-time during his studies and, after acquiring a degree, can apply for a professional or working visa and can reach the highly skilled visa. Overall, achieving permanent residency as a skilled worker in Japan is much easier (Park, 2021).

I have presented the current Japanese policies aimed at alleviating the adverse effects of an ageing population. Even though Japan has made significant changes to its policies, it might not be enough to secure continuous economic prosperity. A lot of these relate to migration. While Japan began letting in lower-skilled migrants with the possibility of permanent residence in 2019, the process is still very slow, and the number of migrants who hold a renewable SSW II visa is still in the hundreds, as Japan is still very cautious about low-skilled immigration. Since the stock of highly skilled migrants is necessarily limited, the number of foreign workers might not be enough to fully alleviate Japan's economic and societal problems. Since I concluded previously that migration is the most effective and promising way to modify the demographic pyramid, and I have now shown that Japanese efforts in this direction have so far been limited, I propose the hypothesis that Japan should increase its attempts to encourage migration.

3 METHODOLOGY

I will now examine the prospects of migration as a strategic solution to an ageing population with a SWOT analysis. SWOT (an acronym for *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities,* and *Threats*) analysis is a commonly used strategic tool that allows us to assess the possible future consequences of adopting a particular strategy. It is part of a situation analysis and should be done before implementing a potential strategy.

The SWOT analysis is visualised as a 4-box matrix on two axes (Figure 3). The first axis divides the internal and external factors, the second axis divides the positive and negative factors. This creates 4 boxes: *Strengths* (internal, positive), *Weaknesses* (internal, negative), *Opportunities* (external, positive), and *Threats* (external, negative) (Sarsby, 2016). Internal factors are characteristics that a company/person/group/nation directly possesses and can directly influence change by reorganising. External factors are factors out of our control, influences coming from outside. In the context of general management, it would be market trends, in the case of a country or region they are global and regional political, social, economic, environmental etc. developments and events. Positive factors are desirable factors, whilst negative ones are undesirable. *Strength* is formulated as a capacity, a resource the organisation has at its disposal, that strengthens its position in relation to its goals and gives it an advantage. They are core competencies, usable resources, knowledge bases, and, in the context of a country, political power. They should be used to support *Opportunities* and mitigate *Threats*. *Weakness* is an internal limitation, a fault, or a hindrance to the organization's goals. In the case of a country, there could be unfavourable situations caused by insufficient or non-existent policies.

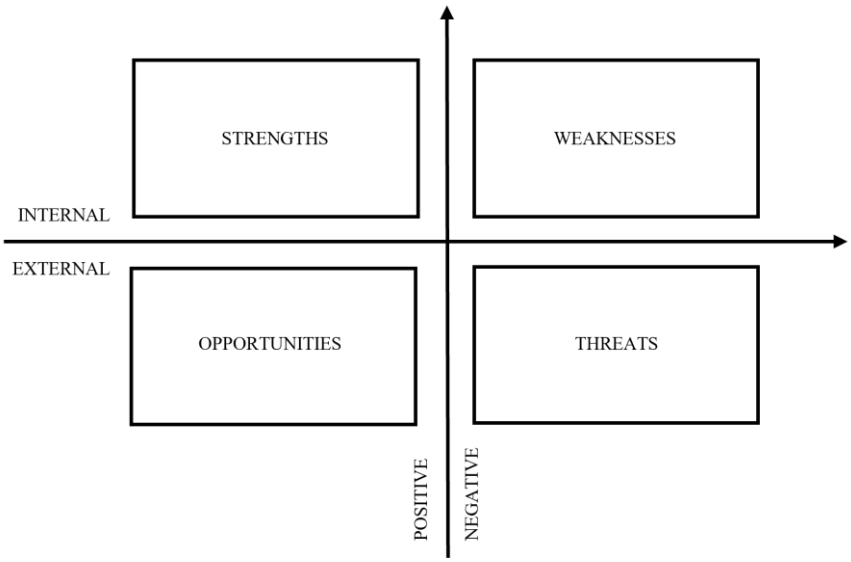

Figure 3: SWOT matrix; created by me

They make the organisation/country vulnerable to *Threats* and make it hard to embrace *Strengths.* An *Opportunity* is a favourable external development, a trend that is helpful to the organisation's goals. A *Threat,* on the other hand, is an unfavourable development, a possibly damaging factor coming from the environment (Sarsby, 2016). In the context of a nation, the environment here refers to anything outside the control of the government of that country. Dealtry (1992) summarizes the goal of conducting a SWOT analysis as building on *Strengths*, eliminating *Weaknesses*, exploiting *Opportunities*, and mitigating the effects of *Threats.*

SWOT analysis is used in many ways, the most common being as a part of the general management of businesses. Businesses use it to evaluate their market position by comparing inside and outside influences, helping them decide on the best approach to remain competitive (Pickton and Wright, 1998). Recently, SWOT analysis has expanded beyond its use in the corporate field. Fields where the use of SWOT analysis is also common include higher education, healthcare, social media, and agriculture (Benzaghta *et al.*, 2021). It can also be used to assess political programmes and policies on a regional, national, and world level. Such use can already be seen in the European Union, where it is used to evaluate programmes before their implementation (Capacity4dev, 2025). The use of a SWOT analysis for policy making on a national level is also underlined by the fact that the shared primary goal of both a nation and a private company is survival and spreading influence; they share common ground for the need to assess themselves and to react to external forces. Nobukatsu (2017) explains:

"The national interest of a state is determined, first, by strategic thinking. Its leaders look objectively at the outside world and consider the means appropriate to avoid or overcome the threats to its survival while simultaneously considering the most appropriate means to improve the conditions of that survival. That is what is known as strategic thinking." (page 14)

However, such thinking has its own limitations. We can't forget that even though the primary goal is the same, there are still key differences between a private company and a public actor (municipality, country, etc.). Private companies focus on maximizing profits: they are focused on reorganizing their internal structure (internal factors in a SWOT analysis) according to their environment, aiming for higher efficiency and competitiveness, and by remaining competitive, they achieve survival and spread their influence in the market. The goals of public actors are more complex. They are shaped by desired changes in social development, a combination of political agendas, and a wide range of individual aspirations, values, and objectives (Karppi, Kokkonen and Lähteenmäki-Smith, 2001). So, while the goal of private

companies is a bigger return on investment, the goal of public actors is the fulfilment of social objectives and the public good (Tregear and Jenkins, 2007). With that comes a different approach to strategic thinking and strategy formation. With a public actor, responding internally to the external environment (internal reorganization) is less important than to private companies, as the public actor has the power to strongly influence the environment itself. Internal reorganisation also isn't as easy because a public actor is bound by legislation, fiscal bases, and administrative and political relations (Karppi, Kokkonen and Lähteenmäki-Smith, 2001). That means that compared to a company, a lot of strategies used by a public actor will aim outwards to influence external factors.

Another important thing to consider when creating a SWOT analysis is that a SWOT analysis should have a defined context and purpose. The reason for that is so that the factors don't repeat in the matrix in different boxes. An identified *Strength* can also be a *Weakness* in a different context (Sarsby, 2016). In the case of this thesis, for example, large labour vacancies in some sectors might be a *Weakness* in assessing the Japanese economy by itself, but in the context of bringing in migrants, it becomes a *Strength*. That means that for a comprehensive strategic decision, several SWOT analyses should be made, each focusing on a different issue, view and scale. In this thesis, I contextualize the conducted SWOT analysis as follows:

> Japan is a country in East Asia. It comprises many islands, with 4 main islands – Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, and Hokkaido. Most of the people populate urban areas in Honshu. It is the fourth largest economy in the world. It suffers from an ageing population, with falling birth rates and high life expectancy resulting in a high old-age dependency ratio. With such prospects, the labour force is projected to decrease by over 50% (assuming employment rates by age group remain unchanged) by the end of the 21st century. This significant demographic shift would have profound economic consequences and should be avoided. So far, Japan's anti-ageing population policies have been more focused on raising birth rates and promoting elderly participation in the workforce. Some policies tackle migration, with low-skilled workers now having an opportunity to reach permanent residency. Even so, Japan has high bureaucratic bars to entry, and long-term residency is still limited.

The purpose of this SWOT analysis is to review Japan's ability to solve its ageing population problem through increased immigration. The assumptions for this analysis are that the ageing population should be alleviated and economic growth sustained. I will create a matrix comprised of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, and consequently, explain each point. I define Strengths in the context of this thesis as Japan's capacity to attract immigrants. Weaknesses are hurdles to the integration of immigrants and Japan's deterring factors for immigrants, which make permanent settlement hard. Opportunities are potential benefits from an increase in migration and positive migration trends. Threats, on the other hand, are, in this context, potential bad consequences of increasing migration. I'm excluding current migration policies and bureaucratic processes from the analysis.

4 SWOT ANALYSIS

The conducted SWOT analysis resulted in the following matrix (see Figure 4). I've identified 3 *Strengths:* high HDI, sectoral job vacancies and cultural richness.; 3 *Weaknesses:* language and assimilation difficulties, lifetime employment and work culture; 3 *Opportunities:* increased tax revenue, international cooperation and talent capture amidst positive migration trends; and 2 *Threats:* disproportionate migrant distribution and social friction. In the following subchapters, I will examine each point in detail.

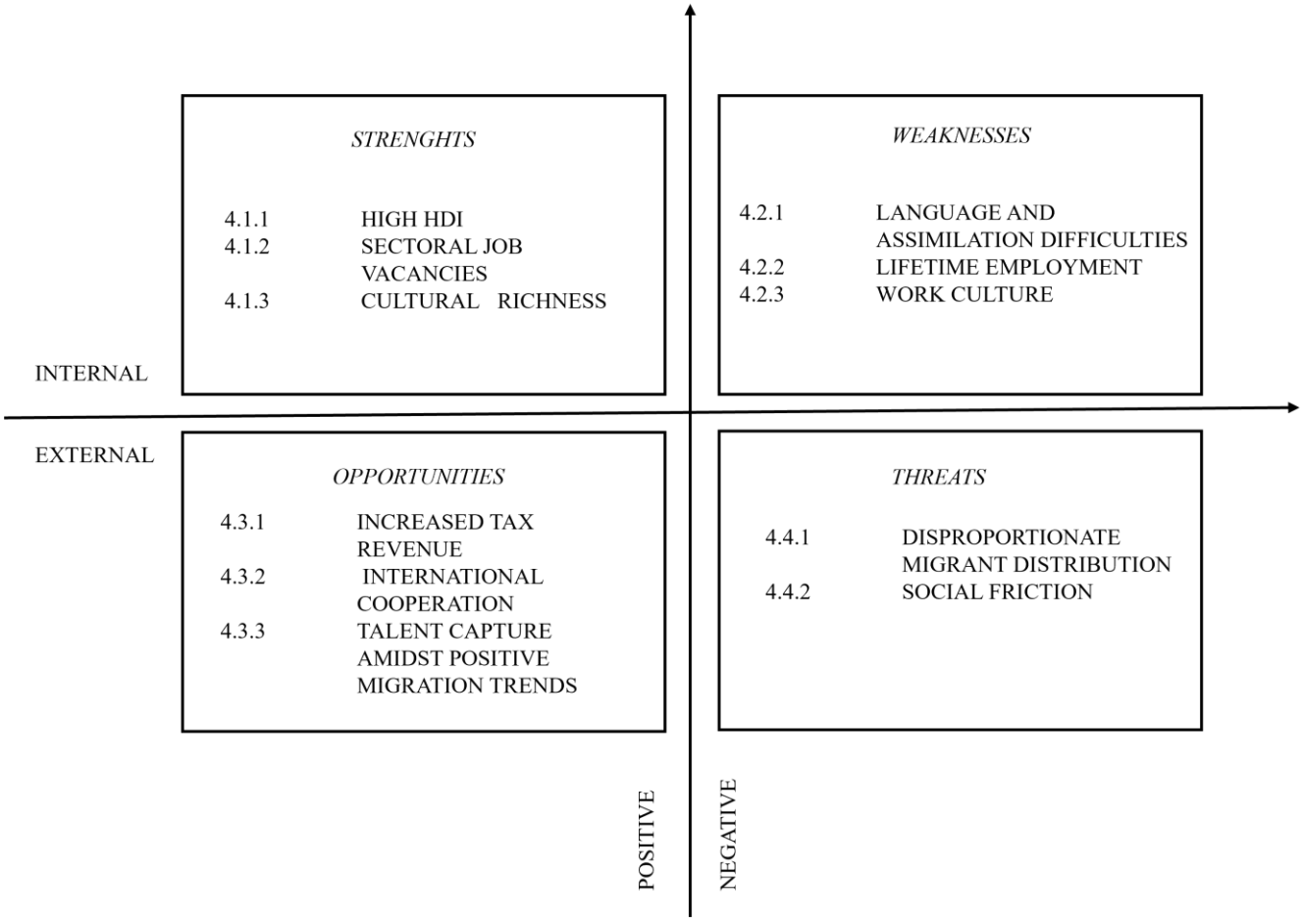

Figure 4: Matrix of the conducted SWOT analysis

4.1 STRENGTHS

4.1.1 HIGH HDI

Japan is the fourth biggest economy in the world after the United States, China and Germany. This alone gives Japan the advantage of attracting talented and skilled workers. One reason people choose to migrate is when there is an economic or social divide between their country of origin and their chosen destination. The choice of whether and where to migrate is related to the difference in income or utility in both countries (Czaika and Reinprecht, 2022), so Japan is already on the right track. Another way to measure a country's level of development and thus attractiveness to migrants other than GDP or GDP per capita is to use the Human Development Index (HDI).

HDI is a composite index created by putting three dimensions together. The first of them is the *Standard of living,* which is represented by the GNI index and calculated with GNI per capita. The second one is *Knowledge,* represented by the Education index, which is calculated by two variables: expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling. The third dimension is a *Long and healthy life* represented by the life expectancy index, calculated by life expectancy at birth. The final value of HDI ranges between the numbers 0 and 1, with 0 meaning a country with no development and 1 meaning a country with full development (Al-Hilani, 2012).

HDI gives a better picture of the attractiveness of the destination country than solely GDP because it also captures to a bigger degree human well-being and quality of life. The choice to migrate is a complex one and isn't based on income alone. One would want to better their situation completely, have the proper income to afford at least a decent standard of living, good and affordable healthcare and the option of quality education for oneself, or one's offspring. This is held to be the reason why high-HDI countries have a positive level of net migration while low-HDI countries have a negative level of net migration (Niva *et al.*, 2023). This claim is supported by current data. 79.6% of international migrants reside in very high-HDI countries (defined as those with an HDI above 0.8), with the rest in high-HDI countries (defined as those with an HDI between 0.7 and 0.799) (International Organisation for Migration, 2024).

Japan has a very high HDI of 0.92, comfortably above the "very high" HDI threshold, and currently ranks 24th in the world. In the East Asia and Southeast Asia regions taken together, it ranks 4th after Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Republic of Korea (UNDP, 2024). Japan's HDI rank in the East Asian and Southeast Asian regions is important, as most migrants in Asia are themselves from Asia, with over 60 million people having migrated between Asian nations.

Migration from other continents to Asia is, in comparison, small, with under 15 million people having migrated from another continent to Asia, with most of these migrants being from Europe (International Organisation for Migration, 2024). Japan's very high HDI is a clear strength to attract regional talent, and Japan should focus on increasing, or at least maintaining, its HDI in comparison to other nations in the region.

4.1.2 SECTORAL JOB VACANCIES

I already mentioned sectoral job vacancies in the context of the economic effects of an ageing population, in this case, labour shortages. I mentioned areas where there is a significant labour shortage in Japan: medical and care, construction, service, agriculture, and postal and transportation. Labour shortages are bad for the economy as they stop the economy from being able to work to its full capacity. However, this apparent weakness can actually be a strength, as it can be used to Japan's advantage to attract foreign talent. Companies, especially small and medium enterprises, are facing job vacancies, both skilled and unskilled, causing production delays and loss of effectiveness. Because of this, they are more likely to hire more immigrant workers (Pholphirul, 2013). This increased willingness to employ foreign workers in sectors with job vacancies will attract migrants from less developed countries, as they are almost guaranteed to be hired.

This is also supported by research, as job shortages in the destination country are shown to affect and significantly increase the migration aspirations of migrants, especially in sectors such as health care and construction, two sectors where Japan is labour-deficient (Ghodsi *et al*, 2024). Japan has the potential to use this strength to fully satisfy its labour shortages by promoting certain sectors and lowering its bureaucratic burden of entry.

4.1.3 CULTURAL RICHNESS

Japan is a country with a unique culture. Japan is a blend of neighbouring influences, mixed religions, and a distinct language formed by thousands of years of minimal contact. It is a country with rich literature, sports, music, and theatre. After the US forced Japan to open its borders in the 19th century after 200 years of self-induced isolation, the Meiji Restoration came, a period of rapid growth and innovation, as Japan had to catch up to the modernities of the rest of the world. A new Western-inspired constitution was written, and modern democratic laws were put in place. Such rapid development was unprecedented at that time. This is even more evident if we look at the results of the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War.

These victorious wars at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, waged against China and Russia, both powerful states, proved that a developing country that has recently emerged from centuries of isolation could be internationally successful.

This rapid growth continued and made Japan a very serious player during World War II. Even after its defeat and surrender, Japan continued to grow its economy. This is known as the Japanese economic miracle, as Japan rose to the top rank of world economies. Japan underwent an immense transformation from a feudal country ruled by warlords to a modern state with a democratic government, and became a hub for innovation in just over 100 years. This allowed Japan to have a unique blend of traditional and very Japanese aspects and very modern and Western ones. Such a multifaceted mix of technology and tradition creates a space for cultural richness, where one can appreciate the past and the future at the same time. This is why Japanese culture has become so popular in the rest of the world, with movies, literature and contemporary pop culture such as anime and manga.

This can become an attractive point to people thinking about migration — especially higher-skilled workers. Japan could hone this strength by promoting cultural exchanges and cultural experiences to migrant workers, which would also familiarise workers to Japanese traditions and thinking and thus make assimilation easier.

4.2 WEAKNESSES

4.2.1 LANGUAGE AND ASSIMILATION DIFFICULTIES

The ability to communicate is usually one of the requirements to work. Especially as a foreign worker, one must either know the language of the destination country or there must be a common language spoken at the place of work. This brings me to the first weakness: Language and assimilation difficulties.

Both speaking a common language or speaking Japanese might pose a big hurdle to working in Japan. The large majority of Japanese companies use Japanese as a common language, with only a small percentage adopting English as their working language (Morita, 2017a). One of the reasons is that Japanese people prefer to use their own language as it expresses the nuances of Japanese society well (I write more on this in section 4.4.2). Another reason is the very poor level of English-speaking ability across Japan. The average score for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test in 2015 in Japan was 71, the second lowest in Asia, and it is still poor compared to other countries. The grammar-translation method that is

used to teach English in schools is less than ideal and doesn't encourage practical usage and speaking of English (Morita, 2017b). With both the unwillingness and/or inability to speak English, the only option left to migrant workers is to learn Japanese.

Japanese is a unique, nuanced language with no clear language family association. It has a distinct grammar system, politeness levels and a complicated writing system consisting of two syllabic alphabets called *hiragana* and *katakana* (*kana* for both) and a logographic Chinese alphabet *kanji.* This poses a big hurdle for Japanese learners. Compared to European languages, learning a logographic language like Japanese or Chinese can take up to 4 times longer (Everson, 2011). This makes Japanese a hard language to learn, let alone use competently in the workplace.

That's why employers are often worried about the ability of foreign workers to speak Japanese, which might lead them to not hire foreigners. An inadequate Japanese language level can not only lead to not being hired but also to further discrimination in the workplace and in daily life, which can lead to isolation. There are instances of foreigners who do not speak Japanese fluently being discriminated against by real estate agents, doctors, and coworkers (Morita, 2016).

This fact is supported by the required language test to work in Japan as a lower-skilled worker. Together with the mandatory vocational skill exams for foreign workers in Japan, which I discussed in section 2.2, the added Japanese proficiency test poses another bar to entry. Such an attitude towards foreign languages and Japanese-only rules severely hinders Japan's ability to attract foreign workers, as they might rather choose a more easily navigated country such as the US, especially in the case of the medical and care field.

A way to alleviate this weakness would be better foreign language learning promotion. Japanese companies should incentivise their workers to learn a foreign language. Also, education reform concerning language learning in schools needs to take place, as well as foreign workers should receive continuous language support.

4.2.2 LIFETIME EMPLOYMENT

The second weakness I have identified is the concept of lifetime employment in Japanese companies. Lifetime employment values not only employees' work but also their loyalty. Companies want to keep the employees they have trained, resulting in those workers working for them for many years, which saves them resources needed for training new ones. To promote such loyalty, wage increases are tied to a person's seniority in a company. New hires often get assigned to a beforehand unspecified department and get a fixed based salary that rises

with how many years that employee worked there. On the other hand, employees of Japanese companies get a very stable lifetime job, from which they can't easily be fired (Fujimoto, 2024).

This system has its downsides, though, as rather than skill and competence, the deciding factor to get promoted is years spent at the company, which can harm performance as the most able employees may not be fully utilised. It also prevents career progression and work mobility, as getting hired at a new company would put the worker back at the beginning of the wage system. Worsened work mobility doesn't help labour shortages as people are disincentivised to change careers. With such demerits, lifetime employment has been deemed to be an outdated practice, and many companies are trying to adopt a more flexible and skill-based approach to employment.

Even though this approach has begun to change, many Japanese people still stay with one employer for the long term. The percentage of employees employed by one employer consecutively for more than 10 years in 2022 was 46.8%, the second highest in the world, and many companies still prefer employees who are willing to work long-term (Fujimoto, 2024). Foreign workers, on the other hand, may not intend to spend so long in one company, as they might want to change employers or move to different countries. Many foreign workers also reported feeling discriminated against in terms of promotion, as there are many companies that lack transparent promotion guidelines. For these reasons, many of them will be less competitive in terms of promotion than their longer-working Japanese colleagues. This makes it so that compared to other countries, career advancement for immigrants in Japan is much harder (Oishi, 2012).

This can be a strong deterrent to migrants wanting to migrate to Japan. Economic migrants are motivated by the opportunity to progress in their career in the destination country compared to the origin country, and the slow career progression in Japan might turn them away to migrate elsewhere. With this, Japan is potentially losing a lot of foreign human capital.

4.2.3 WORK CULTURE

Other than lifetime employment, Japan has a specific work culture that is unique to Japan, and it needs special effort from migrant workers to navigate. Together with language and communication issues and the expectation to work for one employer for many years, this makes it a weakness.

Japan has a reputation of being the country of overtime work. Such can be seen with the existence of the word *karōshi 過労死* (*過 - exceed 労- labour 死- death*). *Karōshi* is a popular

term to describe death from overworking, typically by the body succumbing to cardiac arrest or stroke due to prolonged stress and hypertension. There is another term, *karōjisatsu 過労自殺* (*過-exceed 労-labour 自- oneself 殺-kill),* describing death due to mental factors; in other words, suicide from overwork. These terms have been used since the 80s, and since then, they have become a big social issue. In 2022, almost 3000 people are thought to have committed suicide, with work-related issues being one of the main motivations (Yukawa, Shimanuki and Eguchi, 2024).

This is explained by the high amount of overtime worked. In Japan, more than 30% of people work 50 hours or more per week, compared to 12% in the UK and 9% in France (Yukawa, Shimanuki and Eguchi, 2024). In 2022, the sectors with the most overtime hours worked were postal and transportation services and hospitality. Both sectors were also reported to suffer from labour shortages, which presumably increases the pressure on workers to work overtime (MHLW, 2022b).

Working long hours is a common characteristic for all Asian countries as it ties not only to labour shortages but mainly to culture. In Japan, it is connected to the *ganbaru* (doing one's best) culture. The Japanese define working hard in terms of working long hours and showing enthusiasm. Since Japan is a collectivist culture and Japanese companies emphasise teamwork, it becomes hard to evaluate individual contributions, so 'working hard' becomes the metric of employee evaluation. Many workers still express the feeling of wanting to work hard even after their work is finished, and leaving the workplace before their superiors can be seen as unacceptable. Some workers might also be expected to take part in after-work activities like karaoke, and not accepting an invitation to do so is thought of as rude. In small and medium corporations, it is also perceived that not claiming overtime pay demonstrates loyalty (Widarahhesty, 2020). Further, Japanese workers only take 58% of the paid holiday days they are entitled to (MHLW, 2023d). An unwillingness to join the *ganbaru* culture might lead to discrimination, as the consensus in Japan's collectivist society is not to stand out.

Ganbaru contributes to bad work-life balance. A bad work-life balance makes it hard to pursue personal interests such as hobbies and tending to one's family, and affects the person mentally and physically. Many foreign workers expressed concerns about this fact, especially when it came to raising their children in Japan. Even though the work-life balance is slowly changing for the better, a lot of Japanese companies and workplaces still practice the *ganbaru* mentality.

The environment of not knowing the language perfectly and having to navigate the hierarchy-structured workplace with unwritten social and work expectations in society with still low immigration can be a significant worry for potential foreign workers.

4.3 OPPORTUNITIES

4.3.1 INCREASED TAX REVENUE

One of the negative effects of an ageing population is a country's diminishing tax revenue. Elderly people consume less, which results in less consumer tax on top of having less taxable income. Raising the number of working people should bring fiscal benefits, which is important as healthcare expenditures rise. Research suggests that immigrants indeed have a net positive impact on a country's fiscal budget. For example, in both America (FWD, no date) and the United Kingdom (The Migration Observatory, 2024), data shows that immigration has a positive impact on tax revenue, with immigrants overall paying more taxes into the system than they take out. However, while in America, the effect was seen in all immigrant groups, in the United Kingdom, the effect was seen only in the high-income immigrant group.

The income of the migrants seems to be one of the determining factors of immigrants' positive impact on overall net tax revenue. One of the other determinants is age and length of stay, as in the calculation of the net tax revenue benefit of immigrants, one must not only take into account their taxable consumption and income, but the benefits received back from the state. That means that an older immigrant would, for example, on average, bring less benefit, as he receives more healthcare while paying less into the system over time (Okuruma, 2024).

One approach to addressing this partial drawback, in the case of Japan, could be a well-designed guest worker programme. One that is large-scale and focuses on temporary workers that are both young and skilled could almost single-handedly address Japan's fiscal problems. However, other scholars reach the opposite conclusion, finding that the positive effect on tax revenue over time would be much larger if the guest workers stayed longer than 10 years and became residents (İmrohoroğlu, Kitao, and Yamada, 2017). In either case, in order for those benefits to occur, Japan would need to open its borders to a significantly higher number of immigrants than it has.

This presents Japan with an opportunity to broaden its tax base and solve its fiscal problems by significantly reworking its immigration policy. The new Employment for Skill Development Programme and SSWP visas that Japan put into place in recent years have the

potential to have some positive impact on the Japanese fiscal budget. In order for this impact to be of significance, I will reiterate the point from the previous paragraph — migration through these programmes has to be much larger. This should be further supported by ensuring fair and equal wages for migrant workers.

4.3.2 INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Migration links two countries through the person migrating. That person carries his skills, language and culture from the origin country to the destination country. This link can be translated into the growth of international relationships.

Migration is a cause of social and economic changes in both origin and destination countries. It can contribute to the development of both countries or, on the other hand, be one of the causes of stagnation or inequality. The destination country gets a relatively low-cost workforce for high labour-intensive sectors or highly skilled talented people who wouldn't be able to reach their potential in their origin country. The country of origin, in exchange, can get remittances, but potentially suffer from brain drain (Castles, 2018). The remittances can be financial or social, such as values and customs shared by migrants (Tuccio and Wahba, 2020). Acknowledging and mindfully nurturing the relationship between the two countries can lead to positive outcomes on both sides.

The constant exchange of people and ideas, customs and information between the country of origin and the destination country has been referred to as transnationalism. When looking at migration through the lens of transnationalism, the migration policies of the destination country can have consequences beyond the borders they are intended to impact. Also, the success or failure of these policies will be influenced, to varying degrees, by circumstances outside the country's own borders (International Organisation for Migration, 2010).

A well-designed migration policy created with the cooperation of origin and destination countries can bring mutual benefits — a quicker exchange of beneficial economic and mental goods, such as knowledge and information (International Organisation for Migration, 2010). With an increasing link between two countries through the exchange of human or financial capital, new cooperation opportunities concerning other matters beyond migration can occur.

The migrant workers themselves will receive formal support from both countries (origin and destination) while also having an informal support system in their community. Such cooperations to some degree already exists in the form of Economic Partnership Agreements

(EPAs) or the TTIP. This cooperation is still very much constrained by the Japanese reluctance to bring in foreign workers, and general distrust of their abilities (Naiki, 2015). Also, as I discussed in section 2.2, the TTIP has a reputation of allowing exploitative behaviour, which hardly builds trust between countries. A more flexible and open-minded approach to migration would help to establish a more beneficial arrangement for both the workers and the countries. This makes the new SSWP and Skill development programme a better fit for international cooperation, even though the system is still quite restrictive and there is no guarantee it will not suffer from labour rights infringement issues like it's predecessors.

4.3.3 TALENT CAPTURE AMIDST POSITIVE MIGRATION TRENDS

Migration is on the rise globally. By 2024, the global population of international migrants reached 304 million, nearly twice the number recorded in 1990. Even though migrants account for approximately 3.7% of the global population, this share is likely to rise in the future (United Nations, 2024a). By some estimates, by 2030, global migration will surpass 4% of the global population, reaching over 350 million people (Boutenko, Harnoss and Lang, 2022). There are also rising numbers of migrants within Asia. As I mentioned in section 1.1, the most notable migrant groups in Japan are from Eastern Asia. There has been a significant rise of emigration from those regions, with the number of emigrants more than doubling over 35 years (see Figure 5). This positive global and regional trend in migration presents an opportunity for Japan to capture migrants and help solve its labour shortages and other high old-age dependency ratio-related issues.

And Japan will potentially have a strong position in attracting migrant talent if it implements the right policies. Even with many countries currently experiencing population decline, the net global population will rise, and with improved education, much of this population will be educated. The World Economic Forum (WEF) estimates that by 2040, 60% of working-age adults will have a high school diploma, and 80% of them will most likely be residing in Africa, Asia, or South and Central America. The WEF also created an Openness index. This index shows migrants' willingness to move into countries that are geographically and culturally distant from their origin country without already existing large communities of their nationality. A small score on the index indicates a migrant who wants to stay geographically and culturally close, while a large score on the index indicates a migrant willing to live in a distant and culturally different country. A large number of Eastern Asian and South-Eastern Asian countries fall into the low or medium Openness index category, which is a good

thing for Japan, which is relatively geographically close and culturally similar to these countries (Harnoss, Kugel and Finley, 2023). Amidst a growing share of talented and educated workers in Asia, many of them might prefer migrating to countries like Japan, given the right incentives.

Attracting talent is a big advantage for a country. I already mentioned that a high-skilled and high-earning migrant workforce has a greater effect on a country's fiscal balance. Further, talented individuals contribute to a country's effectiveness, information flows, innovation and, in turn, the country's competitiveness. Talented workers like entrepreneurs, engineers and innovators engage in the production of valuable goods and services. Academically talented workers like scholars and researchers acquire and produce information and knowledge, which translates to future production. Socially talented workers like doctors and nurses provide social services of health, and culturally talented workers like musicians or actors provide cultural enrichment (Solimano, 2008). Being competitively sound in terms of talent as a country is crucial for economic performance and, thus, in part, its development (Leikuma-Rimicane *et al.*, 2021).

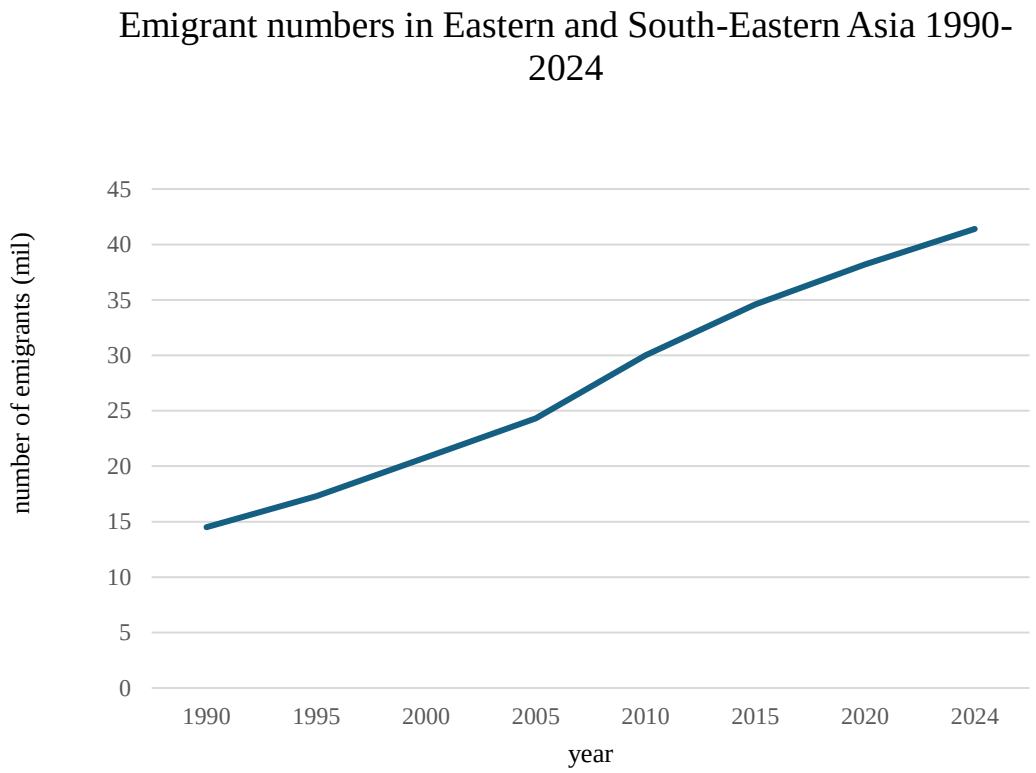

Figure 5: Emigrant numbers in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia 1990-2024; made by author **Data:** United Nations (2024b)

4.4 THREATS

4.4.1 DISPROPORTIONATE MIGRANT DISTRIBUTION

I already mentioned the population distribution in Japan in section 1.1. The rural areas of Japan are facing significant depopulation, as young people search for work in big cities because there are little to no opportunities where they come from. This causes several problems for rural areas. The communities are affected, for example, they can no longer hold festivals and other community events. Many services such as shops, hospitals, petrol stations and post offices are shutting down due to a lack of customers (Ochiai, 2023). Also, many schools have been shut down due to a lack of students. This makes it hard to live in such areas, as services become hard to reach, and due to the lack of schools or kindergartens, having a family in such places seems nearly impossible. This incentivises people to further abandon these places for cities (Yamamitsu, Bateman and Kato, 2023). The growth of cities exacerbates the disappearance of small communities, and migrants may add to this problem.

One of the reasons migrants are coming to Japan is in search of better economic opportunities, so it only makes sense for them to settle where such opportunities are plentiful – big cities. In 2023, more than 26% of foreign workers resided in the *Tokyo* area, followed by more than 10% living in the *Aichi* prefecture (where we can find *Nagoya* — the fourth largest city in Japan), more than 7% living in *Osaka* — the third largest city, and almost 6% in the *Kanagawa* prefecture (where we can find *Yokohama* – the second largest city in Japan which is a part of the *Greater Tokyo Area*, the most populous metropolitan area in the world) (MHLW, 2024).

If Japan were to increase immigration, the migrants settling in large cities might contribute to the growing disparities between urban and rural areas. High-skilled workers are very unlikely to settle in rural areas because of the aforementioned shutting down of services, and because skilled jobs are more likely to be located in cities. Services in rural areas can't support themselves and their community, let alone present opportunities to foreign talent. Migrants who come to live in Japan's rural areas might face discrimination and isolation. This is especially true for temporary foreign workers under the TTIP, as rural areas are much worse equipped to deal with foreigners — even fewer people speak languages other than Japanese.

This threat can be mitigated by bringing in even more lower-skilled workers. A lot of manual labour jobs are needed in sectors based in rural areas, such as agriculture. Lower-skilled workers are also more willing to settle into smaller rural villages and towns. With a proper assimilation strategy and support to municipalities, this threat can turn into an opportunity.

4.4.2 SOCIAL FRICTION

Since Japan is perceived as a highly homogenous society with a low share of immigrants, a change in immigration policy that would lead to a dramatic rise in foreign workers will receive various social responses. Japanese situation is specific in at least two ways: Japanese discourse on its uniqueness and Japan's historical relations with other countries.

Japanese discourse on its uniqueness is called *Nihonjinron.* It originates in nationalist literature called *kokugaku* from the 19th century, and the production *Nihonjinron* literature rose sharply after World War II, because durning the US occupation, the USA ordered anthropological and sociological works to be written about Japan (Clark and Derrah, 2019).[7] *Nihonjinron,* which consists of theories about Japanese cultural or racial uniqueness, is a literary genre exploring a range of fields from language to psychology. It talks about the ethnocentric and cultural homogeneity of the Japanese people. *Nihonjinron* writers believe that only ethnically Japanese people can fully grasp the nuances of the Japanese language and culture, so to be fully Japanese is unavailable to foreign people. It also talks about Japan as a collectivist society that is organised into groups in which relationships are based on trust and dependency, and the consensus is not to stand out (Donahue, 2002). This type of thinking can be seen in the lifetime employment I talked about in section 4.2.2.

The notion that a foreign person, or a person of foreign descent, can't be fully Japanese is strengthened by the concepts of *uchi* and *soto. Uchi* means inside, home, and it refers to an ingroup of people — a friend group, family, school or being Japanese itself. *Soto* means outside and refers to outsiders. In the case of Japanese Brazilians, the *Nikkeijin,* who returned to Japan, even though their heritage is Japanese, they might still be viewed as *soto*, outsiders, and thus suffer from discrimination (Asakura *et al.*, 2008). Also, the descendants of Koreans[8] in Japan feel like using their Korean name leads to discrimination and bullying, and thus, they would rather use their Japanese name in public because their Korean name marks them as *soto* (Aoki, 2012).

The prevalence of attitudes influenced by *Nihonjinron* causes an unwelcoming attitude toward migrants. The focus on cultural uniformity leads to the belief that Japan is exclusively

[7] After World War II, the USA occupied Japan and set up many military bases. During this occupation, the USA wanted to understand Japanese culture, as it was very different from a Western one. This resulted in many works being written, such as The Chrysanthemum and the Sword by *Ruth Benedict,* Japanese Society by *Chie Nakane* or The Anatomy of Dependence by *Takeo Doi* and many more.

[8] Descendants of Koreans who migrated to Japan before 1945. These Koreans have been assigned Japanese names in order to promote assimilation

for the Japanese, leaving little room for non-Japanese individuals. This mindset, which elevates Japanese culture and traditions as unique and superior, promotes an insistence on maintaining Japanese practices rather than embracing openness, adaptability, and inclusion when engaging with those from other backgrounds. A 2023 survey by the Japanese Centre for International Exchange showed that while 43% of respondents were positive about the increase in the number of foreign residents living in Japan, approximately one in three still had a negative feeling (Japanese Centre for International Exchange, 2023).

Another point related to the *Nihonjiron* narrative concerns the Japanese imperial past. Japan failed to recognise its injustices towards countries previously under its imperial rule, especially Korea. This can be seen in various ways, for example, concerning the ongoing issue of Korean comfort women. The failure to address such topics in a direct and adequate way creates tension and a space where prejudice and discrimination against the non-Japanese stemming from historical oppression can be tolerated. Park (2017) states that unless the effects of Japan's colonial rule are acknowledged, racism within Japanese society is likely to persist indefinitely.

The discourse surrounding *Nihonjiron* and residual post-colonialist tensions pose a risk to the wide acceptance of migrants. If Japan was to radically increase migration without the correct measures, it could lead to the spread of radical anti-migration sentiments that have the chance to spiral into further discrimination and even violence. This poses a big social and political threat. In the SWOT analysis, I claim that the best countries for Japan to take migrants from might be nearby east Asian countries. Since these are the same countries Japan has/had troubled relations with, the threat is even more pronounced. A straightforward recommendation for Japan would be to take a direct stance against racist sentiments and to mend its international relations in the same manner.

5 DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Our goal here has been to consider firstly Japan's current potential to attract migrants, and secondly, what changes it would need to make to strengthen its position in this regard. The SWOT analysis showed that Japan is in a good position to attract migrants — both high-skilled and low-skilled. To Migrants, Japan's High HDI suggests a country with an abundance of economic opportunities, with high quality healthcare useful for their later years or unforeseen medical emergencies, and quality education for their potential offspring. Japan's cultural richness may enhance migrants quality of life and make Japan an attractive place to live, over and above solely economic factors. While both high and low-skilled workers would benefit, this might be especially attractive to high-skilled workers. This means that Japan's cultural richness can be leveraged to strengthen the possibility of talent capture and, subsequently, lead to increased tax revenue. The sectoral job vacancies can also be used to capture talent because, as I mentioned previously, job shortages in the destination country are shown to affect and significantly increase the migration aspirations of migrants. It is relevant to note that Japan's attractiveness to migrants heavily relies on how it compares to other destination countries. If another country becomes more attractive, the migration pull of that country will overpower Japan's in the future. Therefore, Japan's strengths should not be taken for granted but should be continuously developed, maintained, and promoted.

Even though Japan clearly has the ability to attract migrants, the experience they have is affected by the weaknesses I identified — language, lifetime employment, and work culture. These weaknesses are organically grounded in Japanese culture, and so they can't necessarily be easily dealt with. Of course, people in Japan won't stop speaking Japanese, but this otherwise natural preference is paired with the inability and unwillingness to also speak in a foreign language. This is partly grounded in *nihonjinron*, in that Japanese people are strongly biased towards Japanese culture and language, which exacerbates this unwillingness.

Further, it is in fact true that the Japanese language, both in speaking and writing, is strongly differentiated from other languages, making it practically harder for the Japanese to learn foreign languages. This makes things difficult for migrants. The lack of language support creates an unwelcoming space where one has no choice but to be isolated. While I earlier suggested that Japan should make efforts to increase English fluency among native Japanese, and this will also be important, this may not be so simply achieved, for the reasons given above. Realistically, my practical conclusion is that Japan should also increase it's support going

forward for new immigrants learning Japanese, beyond efforts already made, in recognition of the problems I identified with the current approach towards migrants learning Japanese in the SWOT analysis.

The other identified weaknesses, lifetime employment and work culture, are already showing signs of improvement. But there is no guarantee that all such practices will disappear, especially in small and medium-sized companies. To migrants who are limited by the length of their visas, the smaller salary with no prospect of it significantly increasing due to their short employment rather than efforts might be a strong demotivator. When it comes to the *ganbaru* culture, migrants from nearby Southeast Asian countries might find it easier, as it appears that the sort of hard work valued in *ganbaru* is a shared virtue among Asian countries. This could stem from Confucianism, a social philosophy which recommends a society that is both collectivist and hierarchical. In such a society, individualism isn't valued as much as fulfilling one's role in the hierarchy. That means that this weakness might be harder to navigate if the migrant is non-Asian, although such a claim would certainly need thorough further research. Nevertheless, the bad work-life balance makes it hard for Japanese people to have children, among other things. Foreign migrants, at least those who would want to achieve permanent residency status and start a family in Japan, would presumably have the same issue. I also found that native Japanese workers were reluctant to claim overtime pay or to take holiday days, whereas migrant workers may expect these things. These issues should be more directly addressed by the Japanese government. A policy that could help would, for example, make it mandatory to actually take holiday days. Further, the Japanese should normalise the acceptability of regularly claiming overtime pay.

Japan has a lot of significant opportunities to gain from increased migration. My point about how increased migration could increase tax revenues suggests that Japan should prioritise high-skilled migrants. But with the skill development programme, foreign workers could acquire vocational qualifications or obtain higher education. Of course, it is easier to welcome in already skilled migrants but offering educational and developmental opportunities can encourage migrants to take a longer-term view, building a lasting relationship with the destination country. For the origin countries, it might not be viewed as brain drain, as the migrants left the country unskilled. It also brings positives, as migrants who want to return to their home countries bring the acquired education and skills with them. If they decide to settle in Japan, they might send home remittances, which are an important tool for development. That's why I want to emphasize proactive international cooperation, which I listed as the second

opportunity. A good agreement can also mitigate the effect of the threat of social friction. The cooperation between countries based on acceptance and preparedness of the host country can, to some degree, function as a preliminary measure to mitigate isolation and discrimination. Talent capture is also very important. Talented migrants innovate and create valuable goods and services needed for the further development of a country. It is relevant to note that due to the Japanese population shrinking, the talent pool of native Japanese is shrinking as well. This makes it a very important opportunity to pursue.

Lastly, I turn to the identified threats. The disproportionate distribution of migrants, which exacerbates the already disproportionate distribution of native Japanese, could be solved with lower-skilled migrants, since the roles available in the rural areas are largely low-skilled. However, since services and schools are being closed in rural areas, it might still be difficult to settle there for longer periods of time. But given the right efforts from municipalities and the support of the community, the migrants could contribute to the reopening of services, which would make remaining there easier both for the migrants and native Japanese. This could create a positive feedback loop, turning this identified threat into a potential opportunity. And since the Japanese rural areas are depopulated and ageing quicker than the rest of Japan, the migrant effect on the demographic pyramid of such areas will be significant.

A bigger threat is social friction. Sudden waves of migrants could engender a hostile response from the native Japanese. I have stated that Japan is perceived as a homogenous society, but this might not be a straightforward claim. Japan, in fact, is full of different indigenous groups, but it is the need to appear homogenous that is instead problematic. The differences of such groups are not recognized, as they are expected to blend in. Inside, they are still viewed as *soto* and face discrimination, which traps them between not being able to express their heritage and not ever fully blending in, which is already the case for descendants of Koreans in Japan. This need for homogeneity, coupled with the nationalistic discourse of *Nihonjinron* and post-colonial tensions, makes Japan unready to fully embrace multiculturalism.

In conclusion, Japan has both the need and potential to make migration the focus of its ageing population policy. Especially for rural areas, it seems like migration might be the only option to stop rural depopulation. In the rural case, this would specifically require the arrival of a large number of low-skilled migrants. Even though Japan made a significant policy change in 2019 by opening the borders to such migrants, the focus is still largely on high-skilled migrants, who have the opposite effect, in that high-skilled migrants almost entirely migrate to Japan's urban areas, further skewing the distribution. But since, for all the good reasons I identified,

Japan also needs high-skilled migrants, clearly a comprehensive effort should be made to attract both kinds of migrants. If Japan were to embrace such a reality, the government needs to take a strong anti-discrimination stance, even though social friction will still likely occur.

As I mentioned in my methodology, multiple SWOT analyses should be carried out in order to inform a truly comprehensive strategy to ameliorate Japan's clear demographic issues. Further SWOT analyses focused on, for example, just low-skilled or high-skilled migration could be conducted, as well as SWOT analyses focused on rural or urban areas. While in this thesis I chose to focus on increasing migration as the most promising potential strategy to analyse, the other direct and indirect strategies I identified could also be carried out singly or in concert with each other or with an increase in migration, and further SWOT analyses could be carried out here also.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, after identifying that Japan has a clear, present, and deteriorating demographic problem that needs to be confronted, I considered the main ways a nation can attempt to ameliorate such a demographic situation, both direct and indirect. I provisionally concluded that indirect methods, while relevant, cannot entirely solve the problem alone, and that from the direct methods considered, an increase in migration was the most promising potential solution.

I carried out a SWOT analysis to identify the strengths and weaknesses of pursuing such a strategy in the Japanese context, and to identify the opportunities and threats such a strategy would create. I conclude that while the choice of strategy is indeed promising, and has a good chance to succeed in addressing Japan's problems, a range of changes in Japanese society and culture would ultimately be needed. These changes could be both organic and longer-term, and promoted by the government in the short term. In all cases, a comprehensive political plan and vision that takes into account all the points I raise would be needed to ensure the success of the strategy.

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