

From tourist phobia to xenophobia: How tourism discourses shape foreigners' policy in Japan

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Abstract

This study empirically investigates the discursive chain in Japan in which social friction arising from overtourism—particularly “tourist phobia”—transforms into exclusionary discourse (xenophobia) directed toward long-term foreign residents and functions as a key political resource for neo-nationalism. Employing a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative analysis of newspaper coverage and qualitative analysis of election pledges and outcomes, the paper demonstrates the three-stage process by which localized social discontent is politically abstracted through the ambiguous category of “foreigners.” This process constructs an exclusionary circuit of political affect, a structure in which exclusionary sentiments are translated into political support and policy preferences, that ultimately influences central government decision-making, most notably during the LDP presidential election. The analysis reveals that the Japanese government’s continued reliance on the policy fiction that “immigrants do not exist”—maintained through the framework of “foreign nationals policy”—deliberately sustains category confusion between tourists (short-term visitors) and migrants (long-term residents). This ambiguity provides fertile ground for exclusionary populism. Micro-level emotions of nuisance or fatigue toward tourists are absorbed into macro-level national narratives of “cultural defense” and “public safety deterioration,” thereby functioning as a powerful political apparatus to legitimize neo-nationalistic and exclusionary policies. Theoretically, this study bridges conventional overtourism research and migration studies under the shared conceptual frameworks of “mobility” and “othering,” positioning tourism as a socio-political phenomenon deeply tied to the reconstruction of national identity. Furthermore, it advances xenophobia studies by empirically demonstrating how everyday affective responses (tourist phobia) are transformed into political mobilization through discursive mechanisms. The findings underscore the importance of enhancing discursive transparency in policymaking by clearly distinguishing among categories of foreign nationals, and of integrating a multicultural coexistence perspective into overtourism countermeasures to prevent the political instrumentalization of local grievances.

Keywords

overtourism, othering, xenophobia, foreign nationals policy, neo-nationalism

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem statement and background: Accelerating exclusive discourse in the shadow of “overtourism”

Since the establishment of the Tourism-based Country Promotion Basic Act in 2006, Japan has positioned inbound tourism (international visitors) as a key pillar of national policy, achieving significant economic contributions, with the number of visitors reaching approximately 31.9 million in 2019. However, following a temporary halt due to COVID-19, as tourism demand has explosively recovered, “overtourism” has emerged as a critical social issue in contemporary Japan.

Overtourism is defined as “the phenomenon of a popular destination or sight becoming overrun with tourists in an unsustainable way” [Collins Dictionary, n.d.]. Although Koens et al. [2018] note that the term is still open to multiple interpretations, it is generally understood as a phenomenon where the concentration of tourists exceeds the carrying capacity of local communities, leading to the deterioration of residents’ living environments, such as congestion in public transport, poor etiquette, and rising rents. This paper argues that such issues should not be reduced merely to inadequacy problems of tourism infrastructure but must be seen as a signal indicating

the limits of social tolerance, particularly towards foreigners, within local communities.

This paper focuses on how backlash against overtourism is not confined to tourism policy issues but extends to the shaping of the image of foreigners in society and influences political attitudes toward “immigration policy.” Although tourists consist Japanese and foreign nationals, the presence of the latter has negative perceptions such as “foreign tourists are a nuisance” are disseminated through media reports and SNS, broadening into widespread negative sentiment toward foreigners in general and being taken up as a major policy issue in elections. The objective of this paper is to elucidate a mechanism distinctive to Japan by which this exclusive discourse is utilized as a political issue within the context of neo-nationalism, thereby shaping the agenda setting and direction of Japan’s foreign national acceptance policy.

1.2 Category confusion of tourists and migrants as the “othering process”

The phenomenon of discontent with tourists transforming into exclusionary sentiment towards foreigners in general is theorized as the “othering process” in sociology. Tourists, as short-term visitors, and migrants, as long-term residents who are engaged in the labor force, should be clearly distinguished based on their residential status, purpose of stay, and degree of social involvement. However, the tangible stress on daily

life caused by overtourism tends to be uniformly attributed to the very fact of being “foreign,” and abstractly perceived as a threat from “alien others.”

Consequently, a stereotype of the “nuisance foreigner” who invades daily life and causes discomfort is formed, and this image is projected onto all foreigners regardless of their length of stay. For instance, discourse criticizing tourist manners is seamlessly switched to an exclusive nationalist claim that “an increase in foreign workers will worsen public safety.” This mechanism is the most pronounced manifestation of the distortion in national sentiment that arises when the state’s two objectives—“accepting foreigners for economic growth” and “maintaining the stability of national life”—clash at the community level.

1.3 Impact on political discourse and originality of this paper

These shifts in social perception strongly shape the formation of political attitudes toward immigration and foreign national acceptance policies. In recent years, there has been an increasing trend where “foreign nationals policy” is strategically politicized by neo-nationalistic and exclusionary candidates in national and local elections, and even in core decision-making processes such as the mainstream conservative party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election [Liberal Democratic Party, n.d.]. This suggests the operation of a discourse apparatus where tourism policy issues are skillfully integrated with immigration and security policies within political discourse, transforming into exclusive rhetoric.

Traditional tourism studies have primarily discussed overtourism countermeasures from the perspective of regional management and economic effects. Furthermore, academic research in migration studies analyzing the impact of tourism phenomena on exclusionary discourse remains scarce. The originality of this paper lies in its cross-sectional integration of these two policy domains, empirically demonstrating the socio-political mechanism by which residents’ dissatisfaction with tourists is “translated” into exclusionary public opinion and political discourse targeting long-term foreign residents.

To conduct this analysis, the paper employs a discourse analysis perspective to examine how tourist phobia is utilized as a circuit for political affect, a structure in which exclusionary sentiments are translated into political support and policy preferences, within the context of rising neo-nationalism. The core of the empirical analysis, utilizing quantitative and qualitative data on newspaper trends, party manifestos, and election results, aims to empirically demonstrate that overtourism functions as a political apparatus that mobilizes exclusionary sentiment and shapes central government’s agenda setting.

1.4 Structure of the paper

By integrating insights from tourism studies and political sociology, this paper aims to comprehensively examine the impact of the negative aspects of tourism on Japan’s social tolerance and inclusiveness, thereby making a timely and signifi-

cant academic contribution. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews previous studies, clarifying the position of this research within the emerging scholarship connecting tourism and migration. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology and data, Chapter 4 presents the analysis results, and Chapter 5 theoretically deepens the “othering process” by which tourist phobia transforms into xenophobia, examining how the category confusion of tourists and migrants is politically exploited in the context of rising neo-nationalism. Finally, Chapter 6 presents the conclusions and academic and policy implications of this study.

2. Literature review

The relationship between tourism policy and immigration policy remains largely unsystematized in international research. However, this study can be positioned within the existing body of overtourism research, studies on foreign national acceptance policy, and recent attempts to bridge the two. This chapter organizes prior literature from three perspectives: (1) the development of overtourism research, (2) the lineage of Japanese immigration policy studies, and (3) new research trends connecting tourism and migration, to clarify the originality of this study.

2.1 Development of overtourism research

The concept of overtourism gained prominence in the latter half of the 2010s, triggered by growing social friction in major European tourist destinations. Milano et al. [2019] highlighted that the rapid increase in tourists exerts pressure on the living environments and cultural resources of local communities, and that tourism is transforming from a “means of economic growth” into a “source of social conflict.” Furthermore, Koens et al. [2018] argued that overtourism should be understood not merely as a problem of tourist numbers but as the result of “social negotiation” over urban space and public resources.

In Japan, overtourism has attracted attention in tourism sociology and regional policy research since the late 2010s. Nara and Maegawa [2020] analyzed that if overtourism is defined as “a state where more than half of local residents do not consider the area capable of accepting tourists,” Kyoto City is capable of further acceptance, unlike Barcelona City, which was used for comparison. Sakamoto et al. [2025] analyzed that the impact of overtourism is related to residents’ life satisfaction in Kyoto City, while Tashita and Yagasaki [2023] defined overtourism as “a state where the rapid increase in tourists exceeds the acceptable range of stakeholders,” viewing traffic congestion in the historic preservation district of Izushi-cho, Toyooka City, as severe overtourism and tourism pollution which is social and environmental disruptions caused by excessive tourism. Kosaka [2019] proposed countermeasures including: (1) utilizing the institutional framework based on national laws and policies, (2) collaboration with external experts to analyze tourist preferences, and (3) consensus building and coordination among a wide range of stakeholders. Additionally, against the

backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic turmoil, the pursuit of resilience and sustainability has become an urgent task in tourism research [Uehara 2024; Elliot and Choi 2025]. However, while these studies focus on friction within the local community, the way in which dissatisfaction with tourists translates to the image formation of foreigners in general and subsequently influences attitudes towards policy has not been sufficiently examined.

2.2 Lineage of Japanese immigration policy studies

In contrast to industrialized nations in the U.S.A. and Western Europe, which became dependent on immigrant labor during the process of industrialization [Doeringer and Piore, 1971], Japan's post-World War II economic growth was primarily supported by domestic seasonal workers [Sassen, 2001]. Consequently, for a long time after the war, Japanese immigration policy research primarily focused on the legal status and human rights of "oldcomers," residents in Japan and their descendants whose residential status is linked to the colonial period. However, with the revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act in 1990 and the increase in "newcomers" such as Japanese descendants from South America, the research focus shifted to foreign workers and the changes they brought to local communities. Kajita [1994] provided the sociological framework, and Komai [1990] laid the groundwork for policy discussions, leading to a shift in discussion from legal status to actual living conditions and multicultural coexistence policies. Iyotani [2001], building upon the works of Kajita and Komai, approached "mobility" and "transnationalism" from the perspective of global justice. Since the 2000s, with the deepening problems of an aging population and labor shortages, the discussion has shifted comprehensively from "foreign worker policy" to "immigration policy," with empirical analysis of the necessity and impact of acceptance becoming mainstream. As of the end of June 2024, the number of foreign residents in Japan reached 3,588,956, marking a new historical high [Immigration Services Agency of Japan, n.d.].

In sum, Japanese immigration policy research has expanded its interests from human rights issues (law, sociology) to labor markets and community coexistence (economics, sociology), and further to national strategy and empirical policy design (economics, political science, public policy), evolving into more interdisciplinary and policy-oriented research.

2.3 New research trends connecting tourism and migration

In recent years, there has been a growing international movement to connect tourism studies and migration studies cross-sectionally. Cheer [2020] pointed out that both tourism and migration are phenomena mediated by mobility, and argued the current situation where the social boundaries of categories such as tourists, migrants, and refugees are blurring. Salazar [2018] analyzed, through a cultural anthropological lens, the process by which tourists and migrants are represented as the same "other," revealing that tourism functions as an "apparatus of

othering." These findings suggest that tourism is not merely an economic activity but is deeply involved in the reconstruction of national identity.

Initial attempts can also be observed in Japan. Tsuboya [2018] focused on the connection between social participation and support projects by foreign residents in local municipalities and tourism projects, examining how the local community, including businesses, perceives both categories and how local communities embrace diversity. Such studies clarify the intersection of tourism and migration discourses, providing a theoretical foundation for understanding the "discursive chain from tourism to migration" that this study examines.

2.4 Positioning of this study

Based on the preceding discussion, it is evident that overtourism research has primarily focused on regional friction, while immigration policy research has centered on institutional acceptance, with integrated studies addressing both being limited. The question of how dissatisfaction and distrust surrounding tourism transform into exclusionary rhetoric toward immigrants and foreign workers has not been sufficiently examined.

Therefore, this study empirically analyzes the nexus between political discourse on tourism policy and foreigners' policy, utilizing party manifestos, election results published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, and related newspaper articles. The objective is to elucidate the process by which negative sentiment toward tourists is reconstructed as prejudice against foreigners in general and to present a perspective for rethinking the relationship between tourism policy and immigration policy.

3. Research methodology and data

3.1 Research methodology

This study integrates three types of analysis to elucidate the structure of the discursive chain between "tourism" and "immigration/foreign nationals." In the qualitative analysis, articles related to overtourism (Keyword 2) that mention dissatisfaction with the manners or nuisance behaviors of foreign tourists are extracted. From these, articles are cited in which dissatisfaction with short-term travelers shifts to, or is linked with, concerns about long-term foreign residents and workers. The analysis then examines the specific rhetorical moves, such as the logical leap that "noise from foreign tourists will eventually lead to deteriorating public safety caused by foreign workers." Through this process, the study demonstrates the discursive chain by which emotional complaints are translated into political concerns.

3.1.1 Media discourse trend analysis (Quantitative and qualitative)

This study quantitatively analyzes the time-series frequency of key terms—"tourism-based country," "overtourism," "immigration policy," and "foreign nationals policy"—using newspaper article databases over a specified period. This analysis

aims to grasp the temporal relationship between the social manifestation of overtourism and the politicization of foreign nationals policy. Concurrently, qualitative analysis examines how articles exemplify whether dissatisfaction with tourists transforms into the stereotype of foreigners in general

3.1.2 Political discourse analysis (Qualitative)

A qualitative discourse analysis will be conducted on the election manifestos of major political parties and the pledges of LDP presidential candidates. The analysis will focus on identifying the discursive nexus between descriptions concerning “tourism-based country,” “overtourism,” “immigrant policy,” and “foreigners’ policy.” Specifically, this analysis will reveal how actual cases of overtourism that occurred in specific regions or tourist destinations are utilized to justify exclusionary arguments against foreigners in central politics.

3.1.3 Analysis of association with election results (Quantitative)

Utilizing election results (proportional representation vote share) published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, this study will examine the potential influence of tourist phobia on political mobilization in elections. This is achieved by quantitatively comparing the fluctuation in the vote share of political parties that exhibit a strong exclusionary stance on foreigners’ policy with the periods during which overtourism discourse heightened socially.

3.2 Data

1. Political party manifestos:

- Target election: The 27th House of Councillors Regular Election (Held on July 20, 2025).
- Target parties (Alphabetical order): The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, Democratic Party For the People, Japanese Communist Party, Japan Innovation Party, Komeito, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Party of Do It Yourself, Reiwa Shinsengumi, and Social Democratic Party.

2. Election results from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications:

- The 49th House of Representatives General Election (Held on October 31, 2021).
- The 26th House of Councillors Regular Election (Held on July 10, 2022).
- The 50th House of Representatives General Election (Held on October 27, 2024).
- The 27th House of Councillors Regular Election (Held on July 20, 2025).

3. LDP presidential candidate pledges:

(a) LDP Presidential Election 2024

- Date: September 29, 2024
- Candidates (Alphabetical order): Yoshimasa Hayashi, Shigeru Ishiba, Yoko Kamikawa, Katsunobu Kato, Takayuki Kobayashi, Shinjiro Koizumi, Taro Kono,

Toshimitsu Motegi, Sanae Takaichi.

(b) LDP Presidential Election 2025

- Date: October 4, 2025
- Candidates (Alphabetical order): Yoshimasa Hayashi, Takayuki Kobayashi, Shinjiro Koizumi, Toshimitsu Motegi, Sanae Takaichi.

4. Newspaper articles:

- Target period: January 1, 2016–September 30, 2025.
- Target newspapers: Yomiuri Shimbun (National Edition, Morning/Evening - Yomidas), Asahi Shimbun (Tokyo Edition, Morning/Evening - X-search Asahi), Nikkei Shimbun (Morning/Evening - Nikkei Telecom), Mainichi Shimbun (Tokyo Edition, Morning/Evening - Maisaku), Sankei Shimbun (Tokyo, Morning/Evening – Sankei Databases).

The six-month average circulation figures for January to June 2025 for the five newspapers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Average circulation of surveyed newspapers (January–June 2025)

	Morning	Evening
Yomiuri	5,478,492	1,227,976
Asahi	3,255,840	891,218
Nikkei	1,290,296	442,704
Mainichi	1,240,010	380,254
Sankei	769,204	197,001

Source: Japan Audit Bureau of Circulations [2025].

- Search keywords: This research searched for the following four keywords to measure hit counts, while also checking all article headlines and examining their summaries.

Keyword 1: tourism-based country

As mentioned in “1.1 Problem Statement and Background,” since the enactment of the Basic Act on Tourism Promotion in 2006, Japan has made attracting inbound tourism a major pillar of its national policy. This keyword was chosen as the starting point for this study’s inquiry and as a factor contributing to overtourism. The keyword itself can be considered positive in terms of economic contributions.

Keyword 2: overtourism

Selected as a negative keyword triggered by the tourism-based country approach.

Keyword 3: immigrant policy

As discussed later, the Japanese government maintains the position that “there are no immigrants, therefore there is no immigration policy.” This keyword was chosen to determine how it relates to, or does not relate to, keywords 1 and 2.

Keyword 4: foreign nationals policy

This can be considered an alternative keyword to “immigration policy” used by the Japanese government. It was selected to analyse when and how Japanese politicians began using it, and what kind of relationship it has with overtourism.

4. Analysis results: The intersection of “tourism” and “immigration” in political discourse

4.1 Political avoidance and discursive utilization of “immigration”

Despite currently accepting over 2.3 million foreign workers and more than 300,000 international students, the Japanese government consistently maintains the official position that “immigrants do not exist in Japan.” This stance contrasts sharply with the classification used by the United Nations (UN), which, while lacking a clear international legal definition, often defines those residing for 12 months or more as long-term migrants, and those residing for 3 to 12 months as short-term migrants. This stance of rejecting the concept of immigration is deeply linked to the historical trajectory of exclusionary neo-nationalism in post-WWII in Japan.

Until the WWII, Japan colonized Taiwan and Korea, and granted their residents Japanese nationality. However, after

the war, Japan relinquished its colonies, and these people were stripped of their Japanese nationality [Akashi, 2010].

Following the end of WWII, due to the circumstances surrounding the denationalization of former colonial subjects (such as “oldcomers” like *zainichi* Koreans), the term “foreigner” on the immigration control policy has been incorporated into Japan’s post-war social structure primarily to refer to these established foreign residents. Conversely, the term “immigrant” has been entrenched in the context of the sending side, referring to Japanese emigration overseas (e.g., to Hawaii and South America) from the 19th to 20th centuries.

By consistently asserting that “no immigrants have been accepted,” the government utilizes the alternative term “foreign nationals policy” instead of “immigration policy.” This comprehensive framework of foreign nationals policy intentionally creates a discursive space that aggregates all “crossing others,” from tourists (who may not even qualify as short-term migrants under the UN definition) to long-term migrants, into a single, undifferentiated category (Figure 1).

4.2 Discursive transformation from “tourists” to “foreigners” in newspaper reporting

The keyword analysis of newspaper articles clearly illustrates the temporal dynamics of this discursive transformation.

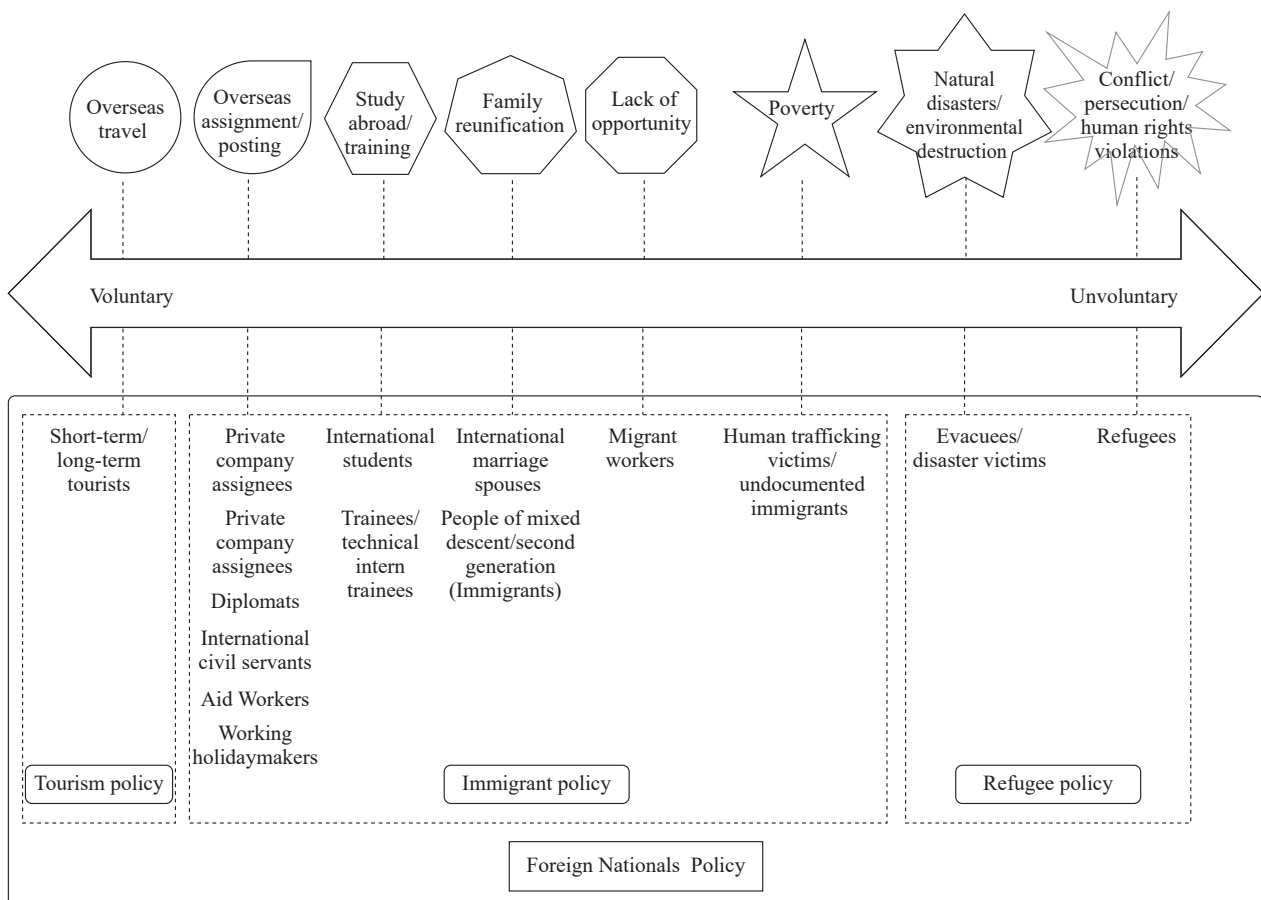


Figure 1: Various forms of human mobility

Source: Created by the author based on the International Organization for Migration [n.d.].

4.2.1 Economic promise and initial discourse (-2019)

Keyword 1: tourism-based country (Figure 2)

Articles related to “Tourism-based Country” were consistently published, and foreign visitors to Japan were predominantly viewed positively as drivers of economic growth.

4.2.2 The pivot discursive focusing on foreigners (2020-2024)

This period marks a turning point where the perception of foreign visits shifted from a conventional positive economic effect to a negative social friction.

Keyword 2: overtourism (Figure 3)

A small peak of articles on “overtourism” was observed in 2019, but the content indicated that countermeasures would likely be necessary as the overtourism problem seen in Europe was anticipated to occur in Japan due to the Tokyo Olympics. Following the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022), the articles on “overtourism” surged in 2023 as inbound tourists to Japan rebounded explosively. Articles concerning “overtourism” saw a sharp increase in 2023, the year inbound tourism explosively recovered.

During this surge period, the focus was predominantly on the nuisance behaviors themselves, such as littering and congestion in public transport, and overtourism was not specifically attributed to foreign nationals. For instance, the Yomiuri Shimbun (August 27, 2023) cited Prime Minister Kishida addressing “domestic and international tourists.”

Yomiuri Shimbun, August 27, 2023 “Prime Minister Considers Measures Against Tourism Pollution”

Prime Minister Kishida on the 26th indicated his intention to formulate measures against overtourism (tourism pollution), which is caused by the concentration of tourists, as early as this autumn. This decision was made in light of concerns being raised about the impact on the natural environment and local living conditions due to the increase in both domestic and international tourists following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This surge period, the initial focus was predominantly on the nuisance behaviors themselves, such as littering and congestion in public transport, and overtourism was not specifically attributed to foreign nationals. However, the discourse rapidly shifted, as evidenced by the *Mainichi Shimbun* (November 16, 2023) focusing explicitly on foreign visitors to Japan and their misconduct.

Mainichi Shimbun, November 16, 2023 “Foreign Visitors to Japan: Rising Tourist Numbers, Tourism Pollution as a Hindrance: Etiquette Violations, Traffic Disruptions”

With COVID-19 infections subsiding, inbound foreign visitors to Japan are rapidly increasing. The number of foreign visitors to Japan in October 2023, announced by the Japan National Tourism Organization on the 15th, exceeded pre-pandemic levels (October 2019) for the first time in a single month. While the government aims to make expanding inbound demand a key driver of economic revitalization, increasing public transport crowding and tourist misconduct could become a hindrance going forward.

This transition from general complaint to the explicit link between economic revitalization and foreign visitors’ “misconduct” represents the decisive moment of discursive focusing, creating a readily available source of affective politics that political actors could later generalize into xenophobia.

4.3 The final translation: Fusion of friction and policy (2024-2025)

4.3.1 The persistence of discursive separation (pre-2025)

Despite the surge in overtourism (Keyword 2) reports in 2023 (4.2), the political and media discourses on immigration policy (Keyword 3) and foreign nationals policy (Keyword 4) remained largely separated from tourism through 2024.

Keyword 3: immigration policy (Figure 4)

The year 2018 saw the most coverage of immigration policy. However, an examination of all article headlines reveals that coverage primarily focused on U.S.A. immigration policy un-

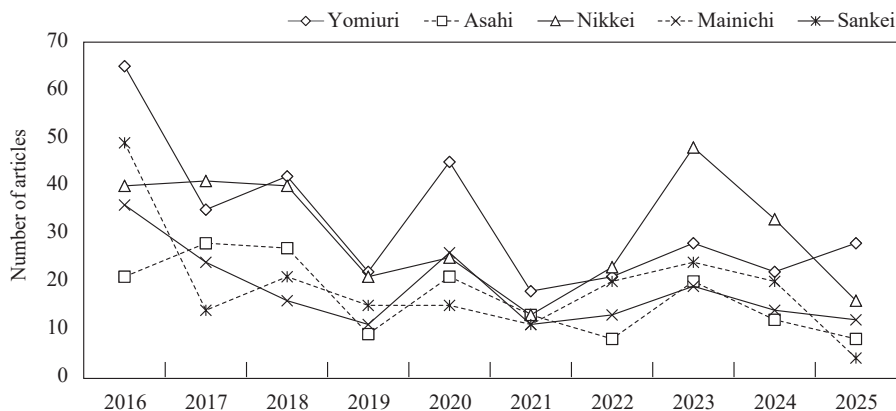


Figure 2: Tourism-based country

Source: Created by the author based on newspaper data-bases.

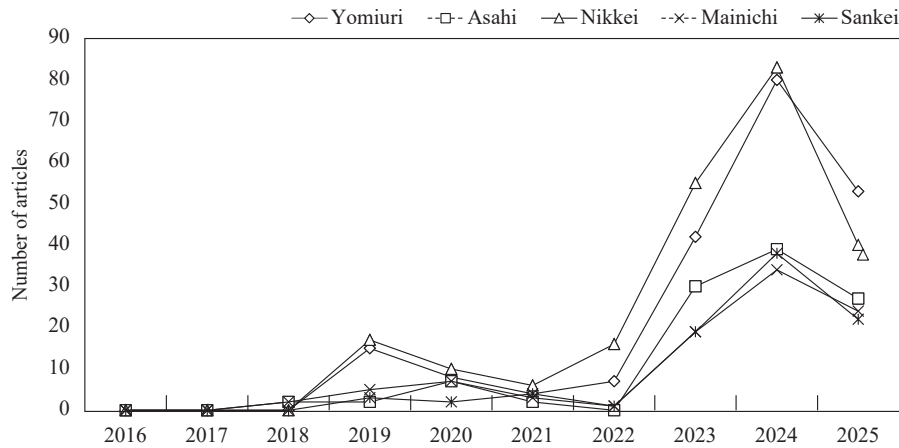


Figure 3: Overtourism

Source: Created by the author based on newspaper data-bases.

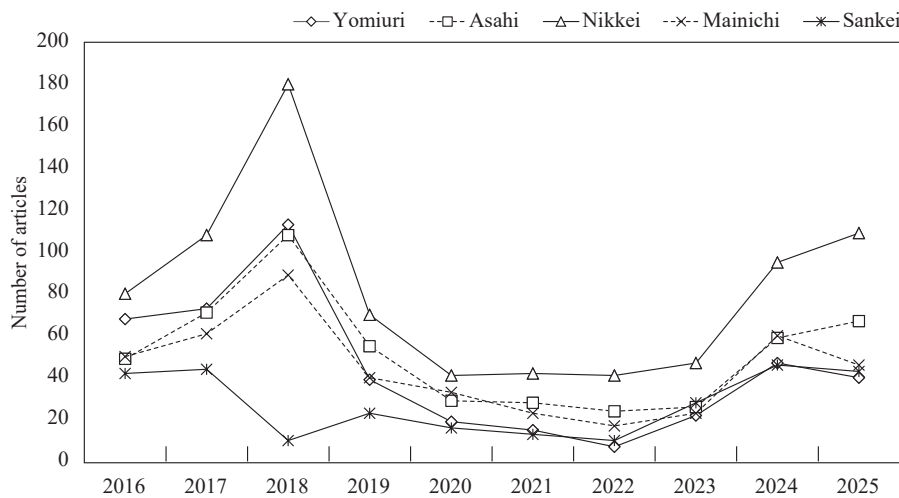


Figure 4: Immigration policy

Source: Created by the author based on newspaper data-bases.

der the first Trump administration, which began in 2017, and immigration policy in response to the rise of far-right parties in Europe. During the survey period, references to Japan's "immigration policy" all pertained to amendments to revision of the Immigration Control Act. While the 2018 revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act established the new residency status "specified skilled worker," leading to commentary suggesting this might be "the first step toward immigration policy," the government maintained its stance that "this is not immigration policy." When the amended Immigration Control Act, which abolished the Technical Intern Training Program and established the Technical Development and Employment Program, came into effect in June 2024. The following statement by the Prime Minister occurred immediately before the domestic surge period for "foreign nationals policy" reporting in 2025.

Sankei Shimbun, June 14, 2024 "Japan to Expand Foreigner Acceptance; Estimated to Exceed 10 % of Population by 2070"

While maintaining the position that Japan does not adopt an immigration policy, the country is expanding its acceptance of foreign nationals as a measure to secure workers. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida reiterated this stance in the House of Councillors Judicial Affairs Committee on June 6th, stating, "We have no intention of adopting what is known as an immigration policy."

Furthermore, even the political use of foreign nationals policy (Keyword 4) remained focused on labor issues. For instance, the CDP's 2019 "Multicultural Coexistence Society" draft and the Keidanren's 2024 proposal both centered on foreign worker policy, considering tourism policy separately.

Nikkei Shimbun, May 31, 2024 "Keidanren Chairman Tokura to Propose Target Number of Foreign Talent for 2040"

He explained that a new committee on foreign nationals policy would be established to study the development of an acceptance environment and other related issues.

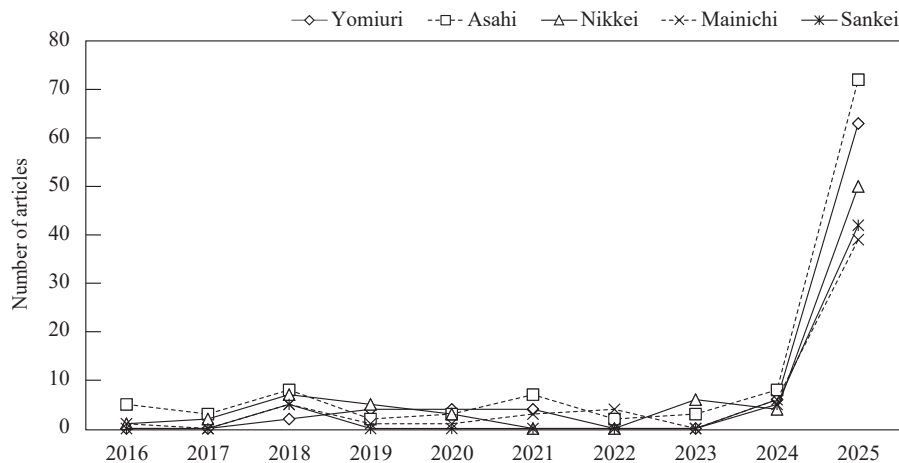


Figure 5: Foreign nationals policy

Source: Created by the author based on newspaper data-bases.

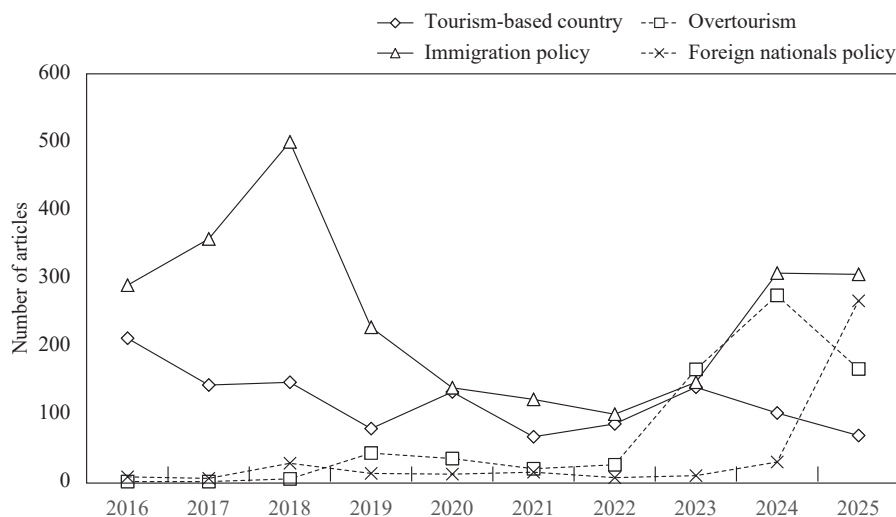


Figure 6: Comparison of 4 keywords.

Source: Created by the author based on newspaper data-bases.

4.3.2 The discursive convergence and surge (2025)

Keyword 4: foreign nationals policy (Figure 5)

The pre-2025 focus on foreign worker policy abruptly converged with general anti-foreigner sentiment during the 2025 election cycle.

However, by the time of the 2025 House of Councillors Regular Election, the term “foreign nationals policy” had not only begun to encompass all categories, from short-term tourists to immigrants and refugees, but the volume of reporting using this keyword also increased dramatically (Figure 5).

The subject of overtourism articles, which was referred to simply as “tourists” or “domestic and international tourists” during the 2023 surge, is frequently described as overtourism caused by foreign tourists in 2025. This indicates a discursive focusing on foreigners.

According to Figure 6, the number of articles concerning foreigners’ policy significantly increased approximately two years after the surge in overtourism reports. This suggests that specific dissatisfaction with tourists (overtourism) was, over

time, translated into a political concern regarding foreigners in general and incorporated into central political discourse. This time lag empirically supports the progression of the othering process, where local residents’ concrete tourist phobia is generalized through media and SNS and ultimately utilized by political actors (parties and candidates) as xenophobia.

4.4 The political effect on election results (2025)

The dynamics and outcomes of the 27th House of Councillors Regular Election (held in July 2025) demonstrate that foreigners’ policy functioned as an exclusionary political battleground.

4.4.1 The ruling party’s shift

The ruling LDP, which had not explicitly mentioned “foreigners’ policy” in the 2024 general election, included it in their manifesto for the 2025 House of Councillors election. This indicates that foreigners’ policy had emerged as an unavoidable electoral issue (Table 2).

Table 2: Manifesto of the 27th House of Councillors Regular Election

Party	Formation (Year)	Main-heading	Sub-heading	Overview
Japanese Communist Party	1922	80. Human Rights of Foreigners, Immigration Control, and Refugees	We demand fundamental revision of the Immigration Control Act to guarantee the human rights of foreign nationals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotion of the "Specified Skilled Worker" status of residence system Revision of the Technical Intern Training Program and the Trainee Employment System, including their abolition Granting local voting rights to permanent resident foreigners Abolition of the permanent residence revocation system Urge the Japanese government to play an active role as an advanced nation in addressing refugee issues Fundamental improvement of the Japanese government's refugee recognition process
		54. Tourism		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From tourism policies prioritizing large corporations and inbound visitors to policies prioritizing local communities and residents
Social Democratic Party	1945			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No foreigner policy, no tourism policy
Liberal Democratic Party	1948	3. A steadfast Japan, a nation shining at the center of the world!		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strictly and resolutely addressing issues such as driver's license conversion procedures and real estate ownership by foreign nationals in accordance with laws and regulations Accelerating efforts toward achieving "zero illegal foreign nationals"
Komeito	1964	3. Enhancing Social Security	Toward a Japan That Can "Earn" Through Tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Achieve 60 million international visitors and ¥15 trillion in spending by 2030, we will promote attracting inbound tourists from the three major metropolitan areas to regional areas. Support regional areas in refining their tourism resources and creating compelling content. Address labor shortages in the lodging industry, we will support labor-saving investments. Additionally, we will work to prevent and curb overtourism.
Japan Innovation Party	2015		Foreign Nationals Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulate a population strategy including measures to curb the rise in the foreign resident ratio and total acceptance quotas, centralizing foreign resident policy management at the national level Confront the reality that systems such as health insurance, driver's licenses, and business/management visas are being collectively abused by certain foreign nationals, conducting fact-finding investigations and tightening visa conditions Introduce a prior approval system and usage restrictions on land acquisition by foreign nationals and foreign capital in security-critical areas such as around defense facilities and remote border islands Re-examine the structure of tax exemptions for non-residents (such as foreign tourists) Promote residency management for foreign workers and their families using My Number Cards, clarifying the roles of the national government, local governments, and businesses"
The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan	2017	6. Promoting gender equality, human rights protection, and support for crime victims	[Key Policy Items: Multicultural Coexistence]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enact the "Basic Act on Multicultural Coexistence" to build a society where citizens and foreign residents can coexist while mutually respecting each other's personalities and individuality and supporting one another. Aim to enact the "Amendment to the Refugee Protection Act, Immigration Control Act, etc." to fundamentally improve and increase transparency in the recognition and protection of refugees, etc., as well as issues concerning immigration control and detention systems. Review the overall residency system and promote the development of a system for employing foreign general workers.
Reiwa Shinsengumi	2019	Standing up to every absurdity	Oppose "immigration policy"—those who support it should not call themselves conservatives, but rather self-preservationists.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oppose the current "immigration policy" because it undeniably functions as a downward pressure on Japanese workers' wages. Draw a clear line against exclusionary thinking that treats foreigners as less than human and infringes upon their rights.
Democratic Party For the People	2020	2. Defend our country by ourselves	1. Uphold our sovereignty 2. Strengthening Responses to the International Situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enactment of the "Foreign Land Acquisition Restriction Act" extending beyond defense facility perimeters, measures for territorial waters, national borders, and remote islands, strengthening countermeasures against espionage activities, and stricter and more appropriate implementation of foreign delivers license conversions.
Party of Do It Yourself	2020	3. Oppose excessive acceptance of foreign nationals.	Japan is a country supported by its own people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revision of the consumption tax exemption system for foreign tourists, expansion of the entry tax (tourism tax) Establish a new "Foreigners Policy Agency" to centrally manage acceptance criteria and system operations in coordination with relevant ministries and agencies. Shift to a managed foreigner policy prioritizing national interests to build a sustainable and safe society.

Source: Created by the author based on parties' website.

4.4.2 The rise of radical parties

One of factors contributing to the increased proportional representation vote share for neo-nationalism parties like the Democratic Party For the People and the Party of Do It Yourself is that their exclusionary rhetoric—strongly advocating for a strict stance on foreign workers/immigrants and the maintenance of cultural homogeneity—effectively mobilized votes from segments of the population anxious about foreigners due to overtourism (Table 3).

4.4.3 The mainstream conservative shift towards exclusionism

This election outcome also influenced the LDP's internal power structure. These five individuals also ran for office approximately one year ago (September 2024), though they did not mention this at the time. Rather, Takayuki Kobayashi and Shinjiro Koizumi were actively promoting Japan as a tourism-

oriented nation (Table 4).

Following the resignation of former Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who took responsibility for the House of Councillors election defeat, four out of five candidates in the subsequent leadership election (October 2025) campaigned on foreigners' policy, culminating in the victory of Sanae Takaichi, known for her "tough stance" on foreigners (Table 5).

This suggests a notable trend of mainstream conservative politics incorporating the discourse of exclusionary populism to attract voters. The fact that regional friction stemming from tourist dissatisfaction ultimately influenced the central political decision-making process of selecting the nation's leader suggests that the "political utilization of the category confusion between tourists and migrants," as asserted by this study, is manifesting in real-world politics. These analysis results confirm that overtourism functions not merely as a regional

Table 3: Vote share in proportional representation

Election (Year)	2021	2022	2024	2025
House	House of Representatives	House of Councillors	House of Representatives	House of Councillors
Japanese Communist Party	7.25 %	6.82 %	6.16 %	4.84 %
Social Democratic Party	1.77 %	2.37 %	1.70 %	2.06 %
Liberal Democratic Party	34.66 %	34.43 %	26.73 %	21.64 %
Komeito	12.38 %	11.66 %	10.93 %	8.80 %
Japan Innovation Party	14.01 %	14.80 %	9.36 %	7.39 %
The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan	20.00 %	12.77 %	21.20 %	12.50 %
Reiwa Shinsengumi	3.86 %	4.37 %	6.98 %	6.56 %
Democratic Party For the People	4.51 %	5.96 %	11.31 %	12.88 %
Party of Do It Yourself		3.33 %	3.43 %	12.55 %

Source: Created by the author based on data from Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

Table 4: Manifesto of LDP's presidential election in 2024 and 2025

Candidate	2024 (elected Ishiba)				2025 (elected Takaichi)			
	Tourism-based country	Overtourism	Immigrant policy	Foreign national policy	Tourism-based country	Overtourism	Immigrant policy	Foreign national policy
Hayashi	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
Ishiba	×	×	×	△ Promotion of employment for foreign nationals				
Kamikawa	×	×	×	×				
Kato	×	×	×	×				
Kobayashi	△ A cultural nation through tourism	×	×	×	×	×	×	○
Koizumi	△ Inbound tourism	×	×	×	×	○	×	△ Issues concerning foreign nationals
Kono	×	×	×	×				
Motegi	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	△ Zero illegal foreign nationals
Takaichi	×	×	×	×	×	×	×	△ Issues concerning foreign nationals

Source: Created by the author based on LDP's website.

Table 5: Manifesto of LDP's presidential election in 2025

Candidate	Main-heading	Sub-heading	Overview
Hayashi			
Kobayashi	United Japan	Foreigners Policy	Strict immigration control Mandatory integration of My Number Cards and residence cards
Koizumi	5. Disaster Prevention and Public Safety Measures		Strengthen command functions concerning foreigner issues and promote comprehensive countermeasures.
Motegi	The development of people is the true measure of a nation's strength.	Toward a society where everyone can gain income and fulfillment through lifelong learning and new challenges	Aiming for Zero Illegal Foreign Nationals: Strict Measures
Takaichi	2. Regional areas hold significant potential for growth Protecting regional lifestyles and safety		Strengthen the command center for foreigner issues and enhance related measures (countermeasures against illegal residents, consideration of land acquisition regulations, etc.)

Source: Created by the author based on LDP's website.

management issue but as a political focal point that mobilizes exclusionary neo-nationalism and determines the direction of Japan's immigration policy.

5. Discussion: From tourist phobia to xenophobia—the process of othering and neo-nationalism

5.1 Deepening anxiety toward the “mobile other” and tourist phobia

Tourist phobia arises primarily from opposition to tangible tourism pollution issues such as noise, litter, and traffic congestion caused by overtourism. However, its essence lies in a fundamental defence reaction against the “invasion of residents' living space.” Within the concept of “liquid modernity” articulated by Bauman [1998; 2000], tourists, embodying global mobility, are perceived as a “mobile other” that threatens the stable daily life of permanent residents. Despite being temporary visitors, tourists are highly visible due to collective behaviors and noticeable cultural differences [Salazar 2018; Urry, 2002], making them susceptible to being targeted for exclusion as disruptors of local order. Consequently, tourist phobia transcends mere irritation at nuisance behaviors, deepening into an emotional rejection of invaders from the “outside” into the “our” community.

5.2 The chain of othering: Utilizing the foundation of mobility theory

The process by which this anxiety toward the “mobile other” eventually transforms into distrust and rejection of more permanent “immigrants” or “foreign workers” is the mechanism of othering focused on by this study. As Cheer [2020] indicates, both tourists and migrants stand on the same mobility-theoretic foundation: the “movement of bodies across borders.” Through this shared basis, tourist phobia extends beyond the temporality of its initial object, expanding into a generalized aversion toward “cultural difference in general.” At the discursive level, concrete complaints regarding tourists (congestion, manners) become abstract, absorbed into negative stereotypes.

The discourse of “ill-mannered foreign tourists” is eventually substituted by generalized images such as “foreigners who worsen public safety” or “foreigners who deplete welfare resources,” thereby merging tourism and migration discourses. At this point, the comprehensive category of “foreigner” begins to function as a symbolic chain that bridges the temporary nuisance brought by tourists with the potential permanent social structural threat posed by migrants.

5.3 Examination of confounding factors

The time lag observed in this paper, marked by the surge in “overtourism” reporting followed by the surge in “foreign nationals policy” reporting, suggests a relationship between the two. However, it is essential to rule out the possibility that a third factor might have induced the increase in foreign nationals policy reporting, which presents the risk of spurious correlation. This study examines two potential confounding factors.

First, one considers the economic situation. While economic stagnation is a common factor that strengthens exclusionary sentiment, Japan's macro-economic environment between 2023 and 2025 has not shown extreme deterioration. Instead, it has been characterized by an explosive recovery in tourism demand and favorable export performance driven by the weak yen. This suggests that the rise of exclusionary sentiment is not rooted in general economic anxiety caused by recession but rather manifests as a new form of social conflict, specifically, social friction caused by overtourism, which is triggered by foreign tourists who are simultaneously generating economic benefits.

Next, one addresses the intensification of global immigration and refugee issues. While international migration issues have persisted since 2023, as analyzed in Section 4.2, the term “immigration policy” (Keyword 3) primarily refers to overseas developments and is terminologically distinct from the domestic surge in “foreign nationals policy” (Keyword 4). The fact that the domestic discourse on “foreign nationals policy” began concurrently with the recovery of tourism suggests an endogenous origin, originating from domestic tourism problems.

Based on these considerations, the likelihood that general confounding factors (economic deterioration, international affairs) independently induced the surge in “foreign nationals policy” reporting is low. Instead, the findings suggest that the discursive chain mechanism asserted by this paper, where the localized social friction caused by the surge in overtourism reporting is translated into generalized anti-foreigner sentiment within the government’s “no immigrants” discursive framework, leading to the surge in foreign nationals policy reporting, is the more compelling explanation compared to alternative accounts.

5.4 Category confusion as a political strategy of neo-nationalism

The exclusionary sentiment inherent in tourist phobia is politically utilized within the context of the rise of contemporary neo-nationalism [Mudde, 2019]. As Mudde defines, neo-nationalism advocates for the “restoration of cultural homogeneity” and “our country first” in reaction to the blurring of borders and cultural changes driven by globalization. For this ideology, “crossing others,” whether tourists or migrants, become symbolic scapegoats threatening national identity.

The category confusion between tourists and migrants is not accidental but a strategy intentionally constructed by political actors espousing neo-nationalism.

5.4.1 Politicization of everyday dissatisfaction

Tourist phobia forms the most accessible form of affective politics, based on the daily inconveniences and dissatisfactions of local residents. Political actors present problems like overtourism congestion and manners as “disorder caused by foreigners,” connecting this to immigration issues such as “the transformation of local culture by foreign workers” or “the deterioration of public safety.”

5.4.2 Re-bordering national identity: From local defense to national narrative

When “regulation of tourism pollution” and “suppression of foreign worker acceptance” are spoken of in continuous sequence in election manifestos and political statements, they function as a discourse apparatus (Wodak 2021). This rhetoric attempts to justify exclusionary and neo-nationalistic policies by absorbing the local defense consciousness of “protecting the region” into a national narrative, such as “Defend our country by ourselves” (Democratic Party For the People’s Manifesto) or “Japan is a country supported by its own people” (Party of Do It Yourself’s Manifesto). Category confusion thus becomes an effective tool for transforming the localized sentiment of tourist phobia into the greater political mobilization of immigrant exclusion.

6. Conclusion and implications

6.1 Conclusion

This paper empirically elucidated the mechanism of the dis-

cursive chain unique to Japan, whereby the backlash against overtourism, specifically tourist phobia, translates into exclusionary discourse (xenophobia) toward permanent foreign residents and functions as a political focal point for neo-nationalism. Through analysis of newspaper trends, political party manifestos, and election results, this paper demonstrates that local social friction is abstracted through the comprehensive category of “foreigners,” forming an exclusionary “circuit of political affect” that influences central political decision-making processes (including the LDP presidential election).

Quantitative trend analysis confirms this translation of local grievances into national discourse. The core finding lies in identifying a structure in which the Japanese government’s adherence to the pretense that “immigrants do not exist,” coupled with the ambiguous framework of foreigners’ policy, intentionally facilitates the category confusion between short-term visitors (tourists) and long-term residents (migrants), providing fertile ground for exclusionary populism. The micro-level emotion of “nuisance” caused by tourists is absorbed into macro-level national narratives like “cultural defense” and “deterioration of public safety,” functioning as a powerful apparatus to justify exclusionary policies.

6.2 Academic implications

This research contributes to academic knowledge in the following two ways.

6.2.1 Integration of tourism and migration studies

While conventional overtourism research focused on internal local friction and migration studies centered on institutional acceptance, this paper integrates the two fields based on the theoretical foundations of “mobility” and “othering.” This offers a novel perspective, positioning tourism not merely as an economic or regional issue but as a socio-political phenomenon deeply involved in the reconstruction of national identity.

6.2.2 Discursive contribution to xenophobia research

In discussing the rise of exclusionary neo-nationalism, this study empirically connected political affect and the discourse apparatus. This study utilized quantitative data to demonstrate the “timing of the chain,” illustrating how the everyday dissatisfaction of tourist phobia is “translated” into political discourse via the social tipping point of increased newspaper reporting, culminating in political mobilization through election results. This deepens the understanding of the mechanism by which neo-nationalism transforms “mass sentiment” into political energy.

6.3 Policy implications

The findings of this research offer the following important suggestions for the design of tourism and migration policies:

6.3.1 Ensuring discursive transparency in policy

The official government view that “Immigrants do not ex-

ist” was shown to be a contributing factor to the category confusion between tourists (short-term visitors) and migrants (long-term residents). In policy debates, the categorization of foreign national based on residency status and purpose of stay contributes a crucial suggestion for reducing the ambiguity that fuels exclusionary discourse and can form the foundation for a sustainable foreign nationals’ acceptance system.

6.3.2 Multi-layered consideration of overtourism counter-measures

Overtourism measures should be approached not merely as issues of visitor numbers or infrastructure but through a multi-layered strategy that accounts for the limits of residents’ “acceptability” and the discursive risk of dissatisfaction transferring to xenophobia. Policy authorities should integrate a multicultural coexistence perspective into countermeasures to enhance community inclusion, thereby mitigating the political weaponization of tourist complaints.

6.3.3 Clarification of responsibility in political discourse

The discursive strategy of linking tourist dissatisfaction to anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiment was shown to influence election results. This analysis suggests that political actors have an empirical responsibility to consider the political impact of intentionally conflating different foreign national categories in their manifestos and public statements.

6.4 Future research

While this study focused on the intersection of central politics and discourse, the following issues are raised for further research.

- Elucidation of emotional mediating factors:
Detailed clarification, using psychological and sociological approaches, of the emotional mediating factors (e.g., economic anxiety, cultural alienation) that facilitate the transformation from tourist phobia to xenophobia.
- Comparative analysis of discourse spaces:
Comparative analysis of the differences in tourist phobia and xenophobia discourse between rural areas experiencing the settlement of foreign workers and metropolitan areas severely affected by overtourism, clarifying their relationship with structural factors of the local community.
- Analysis of informal discourse:
To conduct a detailed analysis of the mechanism of category confusion in the informal discourse spaces of SNS and the internet, and consideration of the role of online platforms in the dissemination of xenophobia.

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