

Amid Japan's immigration squeeze, foreign residents ask: Should we stay?

For foreign workers, Japan has long offered a familiar trade-off: lower salaries and a demanding work culture in exchange for safety, public order, and an enviable cost of living compared with other rich nations. Combined with world-class transit and exceptional food, the pros outweighed the cons for most.

Today, that calculation is breaking down.

A plummeting yen has eroded global earning power, while inflation and rising rents are steadily chipping away at Japan's affordability advantage. At the same time, policy shifts — from sharp hikes for visa and permanent residency fees to new powers allowing the government to revoke permanent residency — signal a move toward stricter oversight.

Compounding the financial squeeze is a shifting social climate. With nearly half of foreign residents reporting discrimination alongside cooling public support for immigration, those who remain are left questioning their place in the country.

As these pressures multiply, foreign residents across the country are left asking a hard question: Does the balance still tilt in Japan's favor?

A Filipino preparing to leave

For Elvin Jay Uy, a 38-year-old freelance university lecturer living in Yokohama, the answer is no.

Uy arrived 15 years ago as a fresh nursing graduate from the Philippines on a post-college backpacking trip. Captivated by Japan's changing seasons, food and a culture suited to his introverted nature, he set aside a prospective healthcare career in the U.S. and chose to build a life in Japan instead.

Starting from the ground up, he initially taught English to kindergarten students before earning an online Master of Business Administration — eventually landing roles as a university lecturer in business and economics.

Over a decade and a half, Uy built a life in which he felt he genuinely belonged — mastering business-level Japanese and surrounding himself with more local

friends than fellow expats. Even during his most recent visit back to the Philippines, he realized his subconscious idea of home had shifted entirely to Japan.

But as the yen plummeted and salaries remained stagnant, the economic trade-off of remaining in Japan grew harder to ignore. Unmarried and nearing 40, Uy recognized that his personal flexibility made a relocation far easier now than later.

Two years ago, he began applying for healthcare positions in the United States. Yet even with a job offer in hand and a green card in process, he hesitated, reluctant to leave the comfort zone that had shaped his entire adult life — describing the prospect of walking away as a kind of “withdrawal syndrome.” What ultimately proved decisive was not the immigration procedural shifts themselves, but the unwelcoming tone that accompanied them.

“It’s not just about the money, it’s about the implied message,” Uy said, citing rising administrative fees and tighter rules. “Intended or not, it feels like Japan is saying: ‘We don’t want you here.’ Once you feel that, you start asking yourself why you’re even staying.”

Yet Uy maintains a pragmatic, even-keeled perspective on the government’s stance.

“I can’t blame Japan,” he said. “It’s their country, and they have the right to set their own discretion. It’s up to you whether you want to put up with it or go elsewhere. I’m choosing to go elsewhere, but I’m parting on good terms.”

Booked to fly home to the Philippines next month before heading onward to America, Uy views his departure as a chapter break rather than a final goodbye. While he still encourages travelers to visit Japan, what those policy moves signaled provided the final clarity he needed for his own future.

“Japan is safe, comfortable, and convenient, but at some point you have to be practical. I don’t want to be stuck in limbo worrying about visas and making ends meet,” he said. “I didn’t plan to stay here forever, but after 15 years, leaving isn’t easy. Sometimes you just need that one clear reason to finally let go — and this was it.”

A South Korean reevaluating the future

For Kim Jieon, having permanent residency has provided her with long-term security without closing the door on future possibilities.

Now in her 13th year in Japan, the 40-year-old global music promoter holds the country’s highly coveted residency status. But as an unmarried woman and

eldest child with aging parents in South Korea, she refuses to treat her status as a permanent anchor.

Driven by a love of Japanese music and culture, Kim swapped her shift at a South Korean FamilyMart for an office job in Tokyo in her late 20s, landing a five-year visa in the process.

“Japan is close to Korea, and I felt like Tokyo suited me better than Seoul,” she said of her reason for making the leap in 2013. “My grandmother used to live in Osaka, so I think there was always some kind of destiny bringing me here.”

Even before moving, she had passed the N1 — the highest level of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test — but Kim quickly realized that business Japanese required a different kind of fluency.

The cultural learning curve was even steeper. She spent years grappling with unspoken office norms before she stopped trying to blend in, instead embracing her Korean identity to build a career spanning tech and entertainment.

She eventually made her status permanent, handling the application process herself and securing PR after a lengthy 10-month wait.

After achieving every marker of corporate and personal stability — down to buying a home in Yokohama this spring — she recently quit her job for a mental health reset. She is now taking time to pursue bucket-list goals, including a yoga certification in Bali and Spanish study in South America, before moving into freelancing, a shift that turns her permanent residency from a safety net into a tightrope.

While owning property tied her physically to the country, her sense of security remains fragile. The new legal framework enabling authorities to revoke PR over minor tax or administrative oversights introduces an unprecedented layer of risk to independent work.

“In a corporate job, tax withholding is automatic — you’re completely covered,” Kim said. “Once you’re self-employed, every tax slip lands squarely on your shoulders. With rumors floating around that you could lose PR over payment issues, the extra pressure made me realize I need to hire a professional just to stay safe.”

It is an irony not lost on her: Japan offers unmatched everyday safety and convenience for a single woman living alone, yet its shifting policies leave long-term foreign residents feeling legally precarious.

“It’s disappointing to see them make it harder for people to stay,” she said. “With the birthrate dropping, Japan obviously needs workers from abroad. Moving in the opposite direction just feels counterproductive.”

Despite where she lives, Kim’s world remains distinctly Korean — from the food in her fridge to her cosmetics and bookshelf.

“Even after all these years in Japan, my habits remind me who I am,” she said. And when she thinks about the far-off horizon, her sense of home hasn’t shifted: “If I had to lay my bones somewhere eventually, it would probably be Korea.”

An Indian family staying the course

For Shikhambri Chhabra, 38, staying isn’t about cold math — it’s about family, community, and putting down roots.

Raised in northern India, she moved to Japan in 2019 without speaking the language, using creative work to bridge her initial isolation. Out of that transition grew Tanban, a brand she launched that promotes the traditional craft of hand block printing.

Today, she and her husband raise two sons — one born in India, one in Japan — in an Osaka home bought to anchor their family. Integration has been a shared effort: her eldest son attended Japanese kindergarten and Kumon, while both parents learned Japanese to manage daily life on their own.

“We haven’t left any stone unturned in understanding the culture and system,” Chhabra said.

Her husband provides financial stability as an IT consultant at Universal Studios Japan.

“My husband actually loves the work culture here, which might be unusual for a foreigner,” she said with a laugh. “He’s punctual, disciplined, and used to get so frustrated with the traffic back in India — so Japan was really the right fit.”

Meanwhile, Chhabra builds their local network through her creative work. Beyond Tanban, she has taught English and art at a local daycare, and now hosts workshops and gallery exhibitions — giving her an artistic presence in the community that her sons carry with pride.

“What I do might not bring in all the money, but it brings social accessibility to my kids and family,” she said. “It helps us find our people.”

Despite also holding Canadian permanent residency, the family chose to build their future in Japan. Chhabra’s husband, leveraging his master’s degree and

career record to score high on Japan's points-based immigration system, secured permanent residency, later obtaining that same status for their youngest son, who was born in Japan.

Prompted by growing talk of stricter immigration rules, Chhabra and her 8-year-old son, currently on long-term visas, applied for PR in December. While her husband remains optimistic — confident that law-abiding, tax-paying residents will weather any regulatory shifts — Chhabra weighs that optimism against a mother's caution.

"If your profile is strong and you have the right intentions, you can get through this noise," she said. "Still, as a mom, I worry about my children's future when the general mindset isn't favoring immigrants. I keep telling my husband we shouldn't put all our eggs in one basket."

Even while her visa status is pending, her reasons for staying remain clear.

"Giving birth to my younger son here means Japan will always have a special place in my heart," Chhabra said. "To me, Japan is my second home because I'll always miss my own culture. But if you ask my husband, I'm sure he'll tell you this is home — and he'll do whatever it takes to keep it that way."

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