

Rùnri (潤日): How New Chinese Immigrants Are Changing Japan

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1. The Concept of “Rùn” and the Rise of New Chinese Immigrants

“Rùn (潤),” which refers to fleeing or emigrating in Chinese, became a buzzword following the 2022 Shanghai lockdown. Since the pronunciation of the word is similar to that of the English word “run,” it carries the nuance of escaping undesirable conditions. The “Run phenomenon,” driven mainly by the wealthy, is becoming a global megatrend not only in the U.S. but also in places like Singapore and Thailand. Japan has emerged as a “sweet spot” destination, with these new Chinese immigrants dubbed “Rùnri,” namely, those who “run” to Japan.

2. Why Chinese Immigrants Chose Japan

There are multiple reasons Chinese immigrants chose Japan. First, the weak yen and low inflation make Japan relatively affordable among developed countries. Second, Japan is geographically close to China and has frequent flights, facilitating travel to and from China while one takes advantage of remote work. Third, unlike the U.S., which is seeing a rise in anti-China sentiment and Asian hate, Japan is considered politically stable and safe. Fourth, Japan has eased and expanded investor visa requirements, lowering the barrier to immigration for wealthy Chinese. Additionally, the shared use of Chinese characters means one can manage daily life without complete fluency in Japanese. Familiarity with Japanese culture and previous travel experiences also play a role.

3. Characteristics of the New Chinese Immigrants

These new immigrants, Rùnri, differ significantly from previous groups, such as technical trainees or students. Most come from urban cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong, and belong to the upper-middle to ultra-wealthy class. Many are business owners, professionals, cultural figures, or media workers. They often live in tower apartments and luxury condominiums in central Tokyo and own assets worth over 100–200 million yen. Despite limited Japanese proficiency, they live their daily life without any issues. These people have a psychological distance from the Chinese government, and they are “lifestyle-oriented immigrants” rather than “survival-oriented immigrants.”

4. Social Impact

The most significant social impact of Chinese immigrants is seen in education. Applications from Chinese families are flooding Tokyo's international schools, where Chinese students now comprise over 30% of the class in some cases. Their numbers are also rising at local high schools and graduate programs, particularly those who studied in the U.S. but faced visa or employment issues.

In addition, Chinese families are increasingly moving to districts such as Bunkyo in Tokyo or Urawa in Saitama, the Japanese version of "school district real estate," for access to top schools. In terms of culture, which includes bookstores, independent films, music, and stand-up comedy, an "intellectual cluster" is forming, centered around Tokyo, and the number of independent bookstores selling Chinese-language books is rapidly increasing.

5. Political Impact

Chinese liberal intellectuals have been increasingly relocating to Japan following the White Paper Protests. Seminars and gatherings are flourishing in Tokyo, and intellectual networks similar to those from the past in Beijing and Hong Kong are emerging. There is also a trend of Chinese nationals entering local Japanese politics. For example, Xu Haoyu has announced a mayoral bid in Atami, and there are also cases of Chinese city councilors being elected in local municipalities.

6. Economic Impact

Chinese buyers are acquiring new high-rise condominiums in Tokyo Bay and high-end properties in the "3A" areas, namely, Akasaka, Aoyama, and Azabu. Chinese developers are aggressively building new properties in suburban and resort areas, a trend known as "bakudate" (explosive construction). In some cases, huge funds arrive via underground banks, blurring lines with money laundering.

Beyond real estate, Chinese investors are trying to acquire liquor breweries, cosmetic surgery clinics, stem cell medical ventures, universities, sports teams (J.League), and gaming IP. Many use fronts like "Asian" or "Singaporean" companies to avoid scrutiny.

The number of Chinese entrepreneurs in Japan's AI and technology sector is also growing, and they are starting businesses following the "Copy from China" approach. In response, Japanese developers, finance firms, and education providers are launching services aimed at this demographic.

7. Future Challenges and Outlook

Japan is now home to tens of thousands of Rùnrì, whose impact spans economic, social, and political spheres. Key future issues include the tightening of real estate regulations (e.g., Kobe's proposal to tax vacant rooms), revisions to visa policies, and changes in China's political and economic landscape.

As U.S.-China tensions increase, Japan is expected to play a strategic role as a "buffer zone." Furthermore, one critical question is how Rùnrì will integrate in the future as part of "Japan's elite" in the economic and political fields. Particularly in the AI research and high-tech fields, where Chinese talent is prominent and exclusion is impractical, Japan will need to explore how to coexist with and utilize these talents.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by Mr. MASUTOMO Takehiro, Journalist specializing in China and ASEAN affairs, at the 103th Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on March 26, 2025.)