

THE ZEIT GIST

## Permanent residency

**You don't need an Oscar, but it helps**

By BARRY BROPHY

Staff writer

As more foreigners choose to remain in Japan long-term, increasing numbers have sought a status change to reflect their commitment to the country and make it easier to build a stable life here.

Since 1997, the number of foreign residents who have secured permanent residence status has risen from 82,000 to nearly 280,000. This figure excludes about 500,000 so-called special permanent residents who were brought to Japan from colonies in China and Korea before and during World War II and their descendants.

Permanent residency can help to secure credit, bank loans and housing, while also removing the need for visa renewal. The application process is more straightforward and often faster than that for citizenship, where ministry officials have been known to visit and check the contents of applicants' refrigerators, quiz them on their sex partners and see what their neighbors think of them.

Since 1998, moreover, when the requirement for time spent in Japan was shortened from 20 years to a "guideline" of 10, it has become considerably easier to apply for and receive permanent residency.



Foreigners are staying longer in Japan and contributing to the growing multiculturalism of the country, as seen in events such as the annual Asakusa carnival. AP PHOTO

And recently, the Ministry of Justice for the first time revealed some of traditionally hidden criteria it uses to judge applications. There are some pitfalls, however, and length of time in Japan is no guarantee of a successful application.

There are several basic requirements for those wishing to become permanent residents. According to the Ministry of Justice, the applicant should be an upstanding character, "leading a life of a good citizen without any criminal record or bad behaviors and without neglecting public duties." Applicants should also be able to support themselves financially, with "sufficient resources or skills to make an independent living."

Applicants should have clean records. Even a driving ticket can harm the chances of success, says Tokyo Lifeline director and Japan Times columnist Ken Joseph Jr.

There is no strict requirement, legal or otherwise, on the amount of time someone should have spent in Japan in order to be eligible for permanent residency. As a general rule, however, applicants are expected to have spent about 10 years in Japan if single, and at least 3 years if married to a Japanese.

There is flexibility in this, however, depending on factors like the applicant's field of employment and "contribution to Japan in the fields of diplomacy, social activities, economy and culture," which could mean just about anything. In these cases, five years is considered an acceptable amount of time to have lived in Japan before becoming eligible.

In fact, a significant part of the process involves the applicant demonstrating that he or she has or is capable of making some manner of contribution to Japan. The Ministry of Justice this year shed some light on the hitherto shadowy application process, outlining in March some of the criteria, including honors awarded, and positions and achievements noted, that can help toward a successful application.

These include any of the Nobel Prizes, the Pritzker Architectural Prize and the Legion d'Honneur. Academy Award winners can expect to tick many of the ministry's boxes, along with recipients of awards from the Cannes, Berlin or Venice film festivals. Olympic or World Athletics Championship medalists are also mentioned in the ministry's guidelines.

These exalted criteria shouldn't deter hopeful applicants, of course. Other more manageable contributions considered appropriate are

periods of service at a foreign embassy in Japan, longish-term employment at listed Japanese companies or others of similar size, and skilled workers or engineers who have lent their expertise to Japanese industry.

In the field of teaching, the ministry specifies that applicants should have held the position of "full-time teacher or equivalent-to-fulltime professor, assistant professor or lecturer working for a Japanese university or any equivalent academic institution as defined under the School Education Law of Japan."

The ministry has also, for the first time, revealed some cases involving both successful and unsuccessful applicants. One case involved a foreign sportsman, who "participated in World Cup (sic) and served as a sport coach during his career as a sport player. The immigration control authority finds it his contribution to advancing Japan's sports." The applicant had been in Japan for 7 years and 7 months. Another applicant, a full-time lecturer at a Japanese university for over three years was granted permanent residency after 8 years in Japan.

Of those who were unsuccessful, many had their applications turned down because they were not deemed to have been in Japan long enough. Another, an ALT at Junior and Senior High Schools for nearly seven years had his bid for permanent residency turned down on the grounds that "the applicant's career in Japan is not equivalent to that of full-time teachers, professors, assistant professors or lecturers of university or equivalent academic institution."

Permanent residency is just that, though it can be revoked under certain circumstances. While permanent residents need not ever apply for a visa again, they must, like regular foreign residents, get re-entry permits before they leave the country.

If a permanent resident plans to leave Japan for an extended period of time, then he or she must ensure that they return within the period stated on their re-entry permit or they can lose their status.

However, a permanent resident -- or any foreign resident for that matter -- who has left Japan with a re-entry permit and can't return before the end of the permit's period of validity can apply at the nearest Japanese Embassy for an extension. However, in these cases a good excuse is expected (the Justice Ministry gives the examples of illness, travel interruption or continuation of studies). In these cases, the permit can be extended for up to one year.

Once somebody has decided to apply for permanent residency, the

application process is relatively simple. Applicants apply through their local immigration bureau. While the application documents -- which resemble those for visa and re-entry permit permission -- must be filled out in Japanese, there is no test of Japanese ability, nor is there an interview of any kind.

However, the applicant should be prepared to provide tax documents outlining employment, pay and deductions over the previous 3 years. Applicants will also need to provide documents supplied by a guarantor, like an employer, detailing salary, tax and other financial information, as well as detail aforementioned contributions to Japan and write an explanation on why they are applying for PR status.

Someone applying for permanent residency needs a three-year visa that will remain valid throughout the process, which can take several months. The cost of the application -- 8,000 yen -- is only paid if the application is successful.

For those with less time, or more cash on their hands, the entire process can be handled by an immigration lawyer. Lawyers handle and file all the paperwork and make trips to the immigration bureau on your behalf. According to Bernhard Flasar, a consultant at the Nakai Immigration Service in Tokyo, many of those who choose to take the lawyer route are corporate clients.

The fee for the service is usually only paid if an application is successful, though depending on the situation, some cash might need to be paid up front.

*Send your questions on and experiences of the permanent residency system to [community@japantimes.co.jp](mailto:community@japantimes.co.jp)*

The Japan Times: Tuesday, Sept. 12, 2006  
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)