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Edited by

Shinji Yamashita
Makito Minami
David W. Haines
Jerry S. Eades

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Japan as a Country of Immigration:
Two Decades after an Influx of Immigrant Workers

Keiko Yamanaka

Department of Ethnic Studies and International and Area Studies
University of California, Berkeley

Introduction

On October 23, 2007, Mr. Taro Kono, a member of Japan's House of Representatives, participated in a round table discussion (with six other panelists) in an international conference held in Tokyo, *Migration and Integration: Japan in a Comparative Perspective.*[1] During the discussion period that followed a brief presentation by each panelist, I asked Mr. Kono if the Japanese government would be willing to grant amnesty to undocumented transnational migrant workers, who were estimated to number some 170,000 in January 2007 (Japanese Bureau of Immigration Control 2007a). His response can be summarized as follows:

Illegal workers have violated Japan's immigration law. The government would never pardon their crime by granting them amnesty. If they want to work in Japan, they should voluntarily leave the country and re-enter with proper visas. Japan is not a country of immigration and does not want to attract immigrants by granting amnesty to illegal workers.[2]

"Japan is not a country of immigration." This statement is a cliché that emerged during the late 1980s when an influx of immigrant workers arrived, mostly from East, Southeast, and South Asia. Regardless of their political views, politicians, policy makers, and even academics claim that Japan is a country for Japanese. Foreigners are welcome to stay in the country but only temporarily.

It is perhaps fair to state that Japan was not founded by immigrant settlers. Unlike such countries of immigration as the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and Brazil, throughout its history, Japan has grown and developed mostly by its indigenous people calling themselves Japanese.[3] Since the 1980s, however, Japan, like many other industrialized countries, has received an influx of immigrant workers from less developed countries. By 2006, more than 2 million foreigners, of many nationalities, had made Japan their home, living, working, and raising their families there. This recent Japanese experience with immigrants resembles in many ways that in a number of European countries (Tsuda 2006). Furthermore, the cliché contradicts the earlier historical fact that between 1910 and 1945 Japan hosted large numbers of immigrant workers from its annexed territories, mostly from Korea.

Immigration and Emigration: 1885–1945

Japan was once a country of both immigration and emigration. From 1910 (the year Japan annexed Korea) until 1945 (the year Japan lost its overseas territories as a result of World War II), a flow of immigrants arrived in Japan in successive waves from imperial colonies, mostly from Korea. What began as a trickle of colonial workers grew to a large influx in the 1920s as the expanding Japanese economy demanded more inexpensive, unskilled laborers (Weiner 1994). The devastating "Massacre of Koreans" in the panic following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, did not deter these migrants. By 1925, 150,000 Korean immigrants toiled in labor-intensive jobs despised by Japanese such as those in mining, construction, and textile manufacturing.

Their number rose dramatically to 800,000 by 1937, the year Japan initiated war with China. Between 1942 and 1945, at the height of World War II in the Pacific, Koreans became an important source of conscripted labor in Japan. As a result, the migrant population grew to 2 million by the end of the war in 1945. The conscripted laborers met extremely harsh treatment by management, producing "a landscape of unremitting brutality, where beatings, torture and even lynchings were a commonplace occurrence" (Weiner 1994: 206). During the same period, at war fronts in China and elsewhere, up to 200,000 young women from Korea, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Holland served as sex slaves—euphemistically called "comfort women" (*jugun iannfu*)—serving sexual appetites of warring Japanese soldiers (Tanaka 2002).

In a flow of reverse migration, Japan sent large numbers of migrants to other countries, as well as to territories it had annexed as a result of victories in wars between 1885 and 1942 (Suzuki 1992; Watanabe 1994; Tsuchida 1998). Nearly 800,000 Japanese migrated to North and South America, Asia and the Pacific, and Russia in search of better economic opportunities during this period. In addition, two and a half million civilians migrated between 1900 and 1945 to Japanese colonies, including Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, Sakhalin, and the South Sea Islands.

A half century later, Japan received more than half a million foreign workers, mostly from Asia and Latin America. Since the late 1980s, a substantial literature has been produced by Japanese policy makers, intellectuals, and business organizations, debating the economic and cultural impacts of the arrival of these diverse groups on the Japanese population. Their arrival has been likened to that of Commodore Perry in his Black Ships in 1853, demanding the opening of the country, and is therefore referred to as "the second Black Ship" (Tanaka 1999). Both of these brought threatening strangers to what had been conceived of as a homogenous and unchanging society.

A recent example of this process involves the more than 100,000 *Nikkeijin* (people of Japanese descent) who in the early 1990s arrived from Latin America—mostly from Brazil (and many less from Peru)—to work as casual laborers in manufacturing industries in Japan. Upon their arrival these descendants of *kimin* ("abandoned people") met

a cold reception by the Japanese who regarded and treated them as inferior to true Japanese. This social exclusion of the *Nikkeijin* flatly contradicts a Japanese saying, "blood ties are stronger than water." Evidently something other than genetics or ancestry is at work in defining the Japanese notion of ethnic hierarchy and cultural superiority.

Omitted completely from this current ethnic discourse is the century-old presence of alien communities in Japan. The 700,000 Korean and 200,000 Chinese descendants of earlier colonial immigrant populations have long suffered from social exclusion in the host society because of ethnic prejudice deeply embedded in all forms of social institutions, including a legal code that denies them Japanese citizenship (DeVos and Lee 1981).

Differential Exclusion of Immigrant Workers

Historically, Western countries that host large numbers of immigrants have adopted one of three distinct models for managing ethnic diversity while maintaining national integrity (Castles 1997: 115–117). The model of "cultural assimilation" is currently the central ideology and practice of former colonizers, such as Great Britain and France, where the large presence of diverse immigrants and refugees demands their incorporation into dominant cultures and values. The model of "ethnic pluralism," on the other hand, is the approach recently experimented with by traditional countries of immigration such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, where the cultural assimilation model has proved to be ineffective and is therefore being replaced by tolerance of ethnic diversity as a successful way to organize these increasingly multicultural societies.

In contrast to these two models is that of "differential exclusion," which is closely linked to rigid nation-states where ethnic diversity brought about by immigrants is deemed to be a threat to social cohesion. Consequently "immigrants are incorporated into certain areas of society (above all the labor market), but denied access to others (such as welfare systems, citizenship and political participation)" (Castles 1997: 115). This model has commonly been adopted by countries such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, most notably Germany, where the formation of the nation-state came relatively late and met significant difficulties in uniting the nation.

In East and Southeast Asia, where colonialism, war, and poverty have long delayed democracy and economic development, national leaders have directed much of their efforts toward cementing the foundation of the nation-state (Yamanaka and Piper 2005). These governments have constructed and maintained sharp boundaries between citizens and non-citizens as a way to unite their often ethnically and ideologically divided nations. In their views, foreigners or immigrants threaten national integrity while draining national resources. Asia's labor importing countries (Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan) have thus opted to erect high walls against the possibility of massive invasion by unskilled immigrant workers.

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In the late 1980s, when Japan experienced an influx of global immigrant workers, government ministries and research organizations sent delegations to Germany and other European countries to investigate their immigration policies. Upon their return, the delegates reported that the German model of differential exclusion offered the best fit for Japan because it would keep the social costs of immigration to a minimum. This had a significant impact on the formation of immigration policy in 1989, when governmental agencies were debating revision of the Immigration Control Law. That Law passed the Diet in December 1989 and took effect in June 1990. It prohibited employers from hiring unskilled foreigners, while it granted long-term residence visas to all *Nikkeijin* up to the third generation (Tsuda and Cornelius 2004).

As a result, the number of registered Japanese-Brazilians rose tenfold from 14,528 in 1989 to 147, 803 in 1992 (Kajita 1998: 124). Japanese-Brazilians and their families, pushed by Brazil's economic crisis and pulled by Japan's labor shortage, continued to arrive throughout the mid-2000s. By 2006, a total of 312,979 Brazilians were reported to have made Japan their home. Similarly, numbers of Japanese-Peruvians increased from 4,121 in 1989 to 58,721 in 2006 (Kajita 1998: 124). The rapid growth of these legal but unfamiliar immigrant populations has posed serious challenges to local governments with regard to their cultural and social needs.

During the same period, despite the deepening economic recession, labor shortages in manufacturing and service industries continued to attract immigrants from neighbouring Asian countries. Many arrived as company trainees, pre-college language students, or female entertainers. Others arrived as tourists, who then sought employment by over-staying their visas. In 2006, 2,084,919 foreigners, including Korean and Chinese permanent residents, registered as long-term residents, accounting for 1.63 percent of the Japanese population (Japanese Bureau of Immigration Control 2007b). A majority of these foreign residents lacked the citizenship rights that would entitle them to public services and welfare benefits. In addition, there were a total of 194,000 unauthorized workers and residents without any legal protection whatsoever.

Civil Action for Immigrants' Rights

The blatant contradictions inherent in economic globalization have generated many grassroots movements advocating universal human rights. The daily experience of oppression spurs ethnic minorities, immigrants, women, and other socially disadvantaged groups to develop collective identities with shared interests that lead them to rally for change (Sassen 1998; Portes 1999). Technologies of advanced information and transportation make instantaneous communication possible across national boundaries, which permits extensive development of transnational networks among activists, and between immigrants and their communities of origin and destination (Vertovec 1999). A recent flurry of literature has proposed alternative forms of citizenship, based on

residence rather than nationality. Examples of descriptive terms for these forms of alternative citizenship include: "transnational citizenship," "global citizenship," "multicultural citizenship," and "local citizenship" (Tsuda 2006).

In Hong Kong, organizing and campaigning by Filipina domestic workers for better wages and working conditions is a well documented example of the resistance and empowerment of female immigrants (Law 2002; Constable 2007). In South Korea, undocumented workers protested, with support of NGOs, against inhumane treatment by their employers. Their actions inspired other activists to work for rights of immigrant workers, most of whom were unauthorized. In response to these successes, the government and the courts gradually expanded their rights (Lim 2006).

Immigrants and civil activists in Japan are no exception to these processes. Immediately following an influx of immigrant workers, waves of social movements for immigrants' rights rippled throughout the country (Roberts 2000; Shipper 2002). Increasing incidents in which foreign workers were discharged without pay, and uninsured foreign workers who were ill or injured were without medical care, mobilized a few dedicated Japanese citizens to help such vulnerable foreigners. They also demanded that local and national public agencies relax the rigid administrative rules that excluded foreign workers' access to public services and extend welfare benefits to non-citizen residents.

The fact that many foreign women migrants (mostly from the Philippines, Thailand, and other Asian countries) work as entertainers in bars and clubs, has led to many cases of human rights violations at the hands of gang-linked employers (Roberts 2000; Shipper 2002). In response, a few committed Japanese citizens (many of them women) provided the battered women with legal and other public assistance, while also combating clandestine trafficking in women across Japanese borders.

In my own research since the mid-1990s, in Hamamatsu City, Central Japan, I have witnessed increasing community activities among Brazilian immigrants, including a group of working parents who organized networks to help their children overcome their difficulties as pupils in Japanese public elementary schools (Yamanaka 2003a). In another instance, a group of Hamamatsu citizens organized to advocate for immigrants' rights to public services, especially inexpensive health care. Yet another group provided uninsured immigrants with free annual medical check-ups. These groups raised public awareness and pressured the local government to take action on behalf of foreign residents (Yamanaka 2005). Similarly, I discovered that within a small community of undocumented Nepali visa-overstayers, the lack of rights in Japan had encouraged them to engage in a variety of social and cultural activities for mutual help and cultural preservation (Yamanaka 2003b, 2007).

Increasing numbers of immigrants, especially Brazilians and their families, have imposed serious difficulties on Hamamatsu's local government. In earlier years, administrators attempted to overcome linguistic and cultural gaps by providing to the immi-

grants translation of information on public services (Tegtmeyer Pak 2000). However, increasing incidents of cultural friction between immigrants and citizens, aggravated by frequent media reports of ethnic discrimination and high school dropout rates of immigrant children, finally led the local government to focus on institutional gaps (Yamanaka 2003a, 2006). By 2000, the city had established a Foreign Citizens Forum as an advisory board to the Mayor (e.g., Han 2004). It had also organized Japanese language classes for the many immigrant children who were not enrolled in school, and developed a bilingual school that instructed Brazilian children in both Japanese and Portuguese (Yamanaka 2006).

Despite the good intentions of activists and administrators in Hamamatsu, many of their actions and programs on behalf of immigrants failed or were discontinued before they had a chance to succeed. This was because most immigrants' and citizens' organizations lacked enough manpower, leadership, resources, and expertise to expand their activities. Typically they relied upon personal resources including enthusiasm, commitment, and occupational skills, but they lacked the social capital and institutional support that would have provided them with connections, information, influence, and other resources. As a result, most civil actions failed to have a direct impact on policy change (Yamanaka 2005, 2006). At the same time, the Hamamatsu municipal government lacked authority to make decisions about policies regarding immigrants' access to public services (including health care insurance and public education for immigrant children). It therefore relied on temporary funding and volunteer participation in implementing special programs for immigrants and their children (Yamanaka 2006).

By the late 1990s, loosely connected small citizens' groups advocating immigrants' rights began coordinating their efforts and resources for systematic strategies and lobbying at the national level (Milly 2006: 134–5). In 1997, they established the National Network in Support of Migrant Workers to project their agenda directly into national politics by networking policy-specific expertise and exchanging knowledge of local implementation practices. Over the years, as advocates became familiar with administrative procedures in relevant ministries and grew sophisticated in employing policy expertise, they were able to make inroads in negotiating with, and mediating among, various public agencies. However, according to Milly's assessment (2006: 148), despite some desired outcomes, on the whole, the advocates' efforts have not been successful in bringing about major changes in governmental policies on immigrants' rights.

Multiculturalism Past and Present

The above review of civil actions on behalf of immigrants' rights in Japan leads to two issues: (1) the limit of multicultural slogans that have been promoted by both public agencies and civil groups; and (2) the country's recent history in which the state, corporations, and people have treated colonial immigrants as inferior to Japanese, subjecting

them to systematic exclusion and often brutal treatment.

From the late 1980s, an influx of immigrant workers has spawned a national campaign for harmonious "multicultural coexistence" (*tabunnka kyousei*). The phrase suggests that people of different ethnicities and nationalities should be friendly and trusting with each other in order to live together harmoniously. In efforts to raise tolerance for growing ethnic diversity in the Japanese population, the central government has featured celebrities of non-Japanese origins in its public posters (Morris-Suzuki 2002). Similarly, municipal governments (such as the Hamamatsu City Administration) have adopted a multicultural slogan as part of their attempts to internationalize the local society and economy (e.g., Hamamatsu City 2001). The media have frequently employed the word "multiculturalism" (*tabunnkashugi*) as a trendy word to be spread quickly and widely throughout the country. Despite its increasing popularity, however, the phrase—multicultural coexistence—lacks clear definition and is consequently inconsistent in its meaning depending on the interests of the user.

To Morris-Suzuki (2002: 154–5), a historian of Korean immigration to Japan, contemporary discourse on multiculturalism in Japan appears to be superficial with little substance. In her view, "culture," in the context of cultural or ethnic diversity, refers primarily to an esthetic framework separated from politics and the everyday lives of ordinary people. "Cultural diversity," so defined, is manifest in well-organized activities and symbolic expressions that occur in tightly controlled spaces and contexts (such as the opening ceremonies of the 2000 G 8 Kyushu-Okinawa Summit or the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics). This implies to Morris-Suzuki that multiculturalism is acceptable in contemporary Japan only when it does not challenge the status quo, and thus remains merely "cosmetic." One result of this superficial nature of Japanese multiculturalism is that it applies social pressure on non-Japanese residents to be loyal to Japan as a nation and to its symbolic culture, rather than enabling them to celebrate their own diverse origins and traditions. According to her, cosmetic multiculturalism aims to achieve two interrelated goals of the nation-state: (1) to standardize diversity by eliminating substantial cultural differences and (2) to integrate its diverse populations into the ideology and practice of a single homogeneous nation-state.

I believe that it is within this political and historical context of Japan's narrow nationalism that the much-heralded campaign of multicultural coexistence needs to be examined. If the phrase refers to understanding of different cultures and ethnicities, it is an empty goal because it lacks political support and institutional grounding in the nation-state (i.e., law, bureaucracy, welfare, industry, labor, education, marriage, family, and the media).[4] As Japan's recent history demonstrates, immigration and resultant ethnic diversity permeate politics at the national level. In Japan's past, colonial men and women were mobilized to promulgate and carry out national goals of rapid industrialization and military aggression in external territories. In the present, global immigrant men and women in Japan are mobilized to survive in global capitalistic competition. In

this process their basic rights are violated and their identities are erased.

This historic parallel in Japan's immigration experience suggests two crucial points. First, Japan once again has an opportunity to transform its homogeneous and exclusionary nation into a heterogeneous and inclusive one, and in the contemporary world of global competition, that transformation is likely to be beneficial. Second, the Japanese state again has an opportunity to take leadership in that transformation. However, in the contemporary context of universal human rights, a multicultural nation must be committed to principles that guarantee equality, fairness, and openness among the nation's peoples. Multicultural Japan must never again privilege Japanese nationals over other ethnicities and nationalities. To achieve this goal, the central government must be actively involved. Local governments and NGOs will not be able to complete this task on their own. Cultural understanding and social harmony can result only from comprehensive legal and administrative systems that promote mutual respect among peoples.

Notes

1) The conference was co-sponsored by the German Institute for Japanese Studies and the Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies of Waseda University.
2) When I asked the question, I had in mind an amnesty program such as the one implemented by the United States following its adoption of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.
3) Throughout its history, Japan's population has included a small proportion of ethnic minorities such as Ainu, Okinawans, Koreans, and Chinese (see Lie 2000).
4) A recent book by the Solidarity Network with Migrants in Japan (2007), *Living Together with Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in Japan: NGO Policy Proposals*, discusses changes and reforms necessary in these institutions.

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