

Migration in Japan

Japan has traditionally been a closed society. In ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural aspects, the country is homogenous, and this homogeneity raises barriers against migrants from other cultures. International migration has been an unfamiliar word until recently. For the Japanese people themselves Japan is a closed self-contained country. Another common belief is that there is no room for migrants, as Japan is already too densely populated.

The roots of the seclusion go back to the Togugawa era (1615–1866) when no migration was allowed, either internal or external. Within the country forcible measures were several times taken to stop migration by returning surplus population from the cities to the countryside. Building of ocean-going vessels was prohibited and foreign ships could land only at Nagasaki. After the Meiji restoration contacts with the west increased rapidly and migration became possible.

Emigration

The history of Japanese emigration began with the departure of the first shipload of Japanese settlers for Hawaii shortly after the Meiji restoration, 1868. There were many troubles in the early stages of emigration, and the government of Japan assumed a conservative attitude toward

emigration for the first two decades. Emigration increased in the late 1800s because of the depression in Japan at that time. The main destinations were Hawaii, California and also Canada. But in the 1920s emigration to these places was restricted, and the main flow turned towards Latin America. This migration ended prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, when the North and Latin American countries closed their doors to Asian migration. The number of Japanese who emigrated before World War II totaled about 776,000 (Kono 1991, SOPEMI 1992).

With the halt of overseas emigration a considerable amount of migrants went to Manchuria, with the establishment of the “new land development” campaign in Manchukuo. Short term population movements were large during and immediately after the Second World War. For two years after the war approximately 5.7 million people came back to Japan and 1.2 million Koreans and Chinese returned to their own countries (Kono 1991).

After the war Japan faced a serious population problem with the economic depression and a high rate of unemployment. Emigration was stimulated as a national policy and Japan resumed organized emigration in 1952. The largest number of emigrants went to countries of Latin America, such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay, but also to the United States and Canada. Around 1960 emigration reached its postwar peak

M.Sc. Krister Björklund is the acting Director of the Institute of Migration.

with 16,000 emigrants a year (SOPEMI 1992).

As the Japanese economy in the 1960s achieved a remarkable speed of growth, the number of traditional emigrants in this decade decreased drastically. The demand for labor increased and living standards improved. Internal migration increased rapidly and the population concentrated in the Pacific Coastal Belt between Tokyo and Northern Kyushu. The depopulation, "kaso" virtually emptied parts of the country of young people, especially Tohoku and remote islands (Fukutake 1983).

After 1970 the rapidly expanding overseas economic activities in Asia and North America led to a tremendous rise in the number of business people either travelling overseas or stationed abroad. Also the number of persons studying abroad has substantially increased. Somewhat more than a million Japanese had officially emigrated up to 1989 and the statistics for 1990 show a total of almost 250,000 Japanese citizens as permanent residents of foreign countries. Of these approximately 110,000 were living in Brazil and 70,000 in the USA. On the other hand, according to one estimate, people of Japanese descent having no Japanese citizenship, including issei (first generation) amounted to a total of roughly 1.4 million (Kono 1991, SOPEMI 1992, Foreign Press Center/Japan 1992).

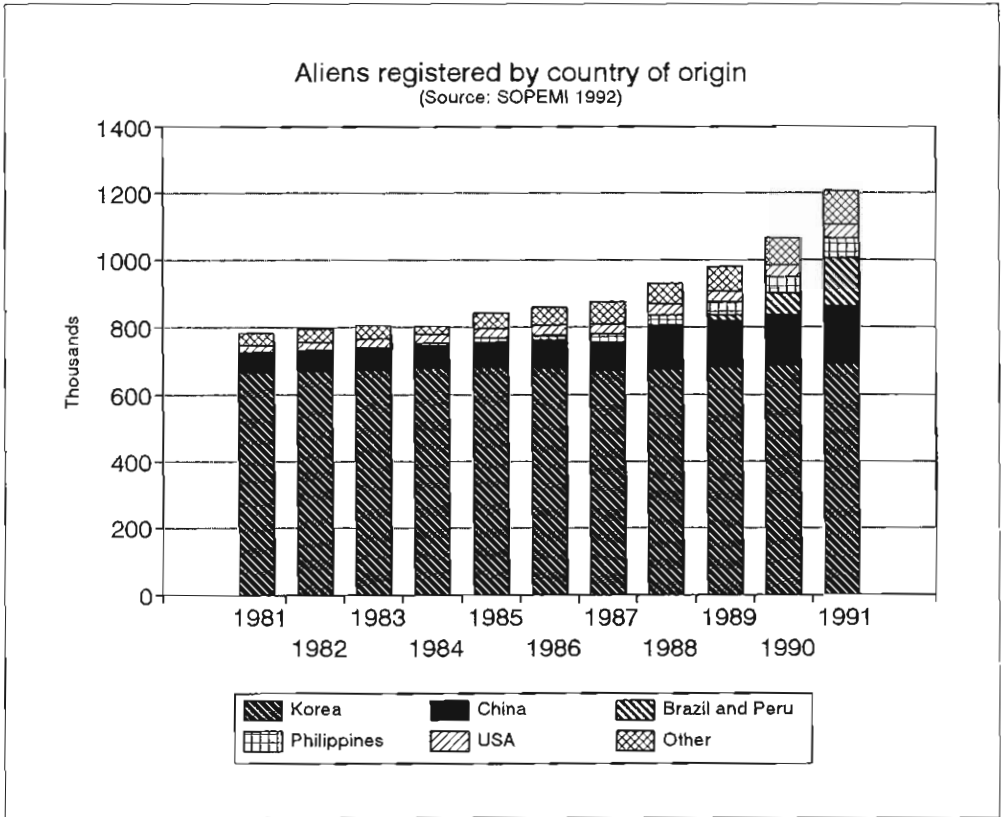
Immigration

The government of Japan, in principle, does not and has never permitted immigration, that is, admission of foreign nationals who want to immigrate to Japan for the purpose of permanent settlement. Nevertheless the Japanese Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act of 1951 actually permits a small

number of professionals and skilled guest workers to enter the country. The internationalization of Japan and the increase of illegal migrant laborers led to an amendment of the Immigration Control Act in 1990, where some measures were taken such as expansion of admissible foreign nationals with expert technology, skills and/or knowledge (Sekine 1991, SOPEMI 1992).

Foreigners have in practice been admitted into Japan since the modernization of society and industry in the late 19th century. The number of foreign residents increased from about 15,000 in 1910, to 35,000 in 1920 and 54,000 in 1930. In 1947, the Alien Registration Law was promulgated, which enabled better statistics on foreigners in Japan. In 1950 there were approximately 600,000 foreigners and in 1980 the number was 783,000. These figures are, however, deceptive, because the overwhelming majority of those residents are Koreans and Chinese and their descendants, who have resided in Japan since before the war. In 1991 Japan's foreign residents numbered a little over 1.2 millions of which Koreans constituted 58 %, Chinese 14 % and Brazilians 10 % (ibid.).

Since 1980 the number of foreigners other than Korean and Chinese has been rapidly increasing. In 1960 Americans made up the biggest group, but in the late 1980s Filipinos outnumbered the Americans and since 1990 Latin Americans of Japanese descent ("nikkei") comprised the bulk of actual immigration. Thus four major groups of immigrants are present in Japan: The experts and business people, entertainers employed by the nightclub industry, mostly female dancers and singers from the Philippines and Thailand, the nikkeis from Latin America and the illegal workers.



- *Experts and Business people*

Due to the economic growth, more business people have come from North America and the newly industrializing economies, and with the increase of the overseas operations Japanese firms have started employing foreign workers within Japan. There is also a large number of English teachers and foreign trainees in Japan.

- *Entertainers*

The reasons unskilled female guest workers can obtain work in Japan are mainly that the indigenous female population is declining and that young Japanese women are highly educated and avoid low status jobs. The employers in the

nightclub industry have thus become reliant on female guest workers. As the Japanese government will issue skilled professionals work permits, young women in developing countries enroll in dancing or music schools to obtain certificates for public entertainment and then apply for a work permit in Japan. (Sekine 1991).

- *Latin Americans of Japanese descent*

Japanese descendants, mainly from Brazil and Peru have flocked back to Japan in recent years, because they are allowed legal entry and long term resident status, up to three years. The nikkei are mainly employed as unskilled workers in manufacturing and construction.

For many of these the dream has turned into a nightmare because of difficult working conditions, cultural clashes and lack of proficiency in Japanese (Battistella 1992). They expected to be welcomed into the society, but generally faced a different reality, not being accepted as Japanese. Many of them have in disappointment returned to Latin America.

- *Illegal workers*

From the mid-1980s the media began reporting the exploitation of illegal guest workers by employers and recruiters, and the concept of "gaikokujin rodosha mondai" (foreign worker problem) was launched. In the recent past, women formed the vast majority of illegal workers, working as bar hostesses, strippers and prostitutes. By the end of the decade the picture had changed, the number of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis equalled the number of Filipinos. The numbers of illegal workers apprehended was less than 2,000 in 1982 and jumped ninefold to 17,000 in 1989. The proportion of men apprehended increased dramatically from 7 % in 1984 to 71 % in 1989 (Spencer 1992). This reflects the increasing demand in the industrial sector. Workers from Philippines, Pakistan, Korea, Bangladesh, Malesia, Thailand and China represent 96 % of illegal labour (Nyukanho kaisei Q & A).

The reasons for the increasing migration to Japan are many. First there is the shortage of young workers in construction and manufacturing. This reflects the aging population problem in Japan, as well as the shunning of employment in the "3Ks" type, "kitanai" (dirty), "kiken" (hazardous), and "kitsui" (physically hard) work. In the past rural areas were one main source for workers in construction and manufacturing, but these areas have become depopulated and depleted

of young workers. Brought up in a period of economic boom and faced with many employment options in highly paid jobs, young people do not take up the "3Ks" work. Another reason is the push from the neighbouring countries with unemployment, high population growth and a low standard of living. The wage difference between Japan and a developing country can be 100-fold. Japan is also a stable country with a secure society, which creates part of the attraction. A reference also needs to be made to China. There has been an increasing amount of Chinese students who wish to study Japanese language, and a great many of these work illegally and overstay their visa (Kiyono 1992, Kono 1991).

Japan has also accepted a small number of refugees. The refugees started drifting ashore in 1975, and at the end of the 1980s their number was somewhat more than 13,000, though some 2,800 of them were subsequently identified as Chinese posing as Indochinese refugees. More than 7,000 of these refugees expressed a desire to resettle in other countries. By the end of 1991, 3,077 boat people were granted long term residence in Japan. The number of refugees climbs to 7,896 with the addition of those resettled through the Orderly Departure Program of the United Nations, those transferred from refugee camps overseas, and those in Japan before the change of government in Vietnam in 1975 (Foreign Press Center 1992). Japan has pursued a policy not to accept any large number of refugees, but to contribute to solve the refugee problem by foreign aid.

Future trends

As the internationalization of Japan is bound to increase, migration will also increase. Japanese citizens will, in grow-

ing numbers, go abroad for longer or shorter periods for business, work, study, adventure, marriage and other reasons, and more foreigners will come to Japan. This has been recognized in the official policy, and the latest amendment of the alien registration law in June 1992, when the taking of fingerprints was abolished after long protests from foreigners in Japan, is a step towards a more open society.

The existence of a great number of illegal workers is considered a serious threat to the status of residence system, which forms the basis of the whole immigration control. The opinion towards foreign labour, especially unskilled workers, is divided.

Employers are strong supporters of strictly controlled guest worker programmes. This was especially the case during the economic boom at the turn of the decade. Another argument for accepting guest workers, especially from developing countries, is that it is a means of foreign aid. The opponents of guest worker programmes argue that Japan cannot because of overpopulation accept guest workers who are likely to want to stay permanently. They also fear that the economic benefits of guest workers will be outweighed by social costs and disintegration, which will disrupt the harmony of the homogenous Japanese society. It is further argued that technological innovation can solve the problem of unskilled labour shortages in the manufacturing and construction industries (Sekine 1991).

The foreign worker problem seems also to have been exaggerated. Three main points should be considered: a) the number of illegal workers in Japan is not disproportionately large b) the recent inflow of such workers has taken place in

conjunction with the business boom of the 1980s in Japan and not in response to a long term labour shortage; c) Japanese social practices in normal times can fill low-level jobs with native workers — some of them on their way up the career ladder. Even if the number of illegal workers rose considerably to 320,000, these would still amount to far less than one percent of the Japanese labour force. These workers also find themselves out of work when the companies cut back (Reuben 1993).

Japanese companies have a long tradition of employing temporary workers for low-level tasks. The problem is that the pool of such native labour is drying up. The recent depression has, however, reduced the need for foreign labour. On the one hand has the official unemployment rate been quite low; in 1986 it was 2.8 percent and in April 1993 it was 2.3 percent (Dai Ichi Kangyo Bank 1993), but on the other hand has the employed labour force with nothing to do increased. Many big companies have workers who sit around all day doing nothing. They are known in Japan as "madogiwazoku" (the tribe who sits by the window). According to some estimates these excess workers rise the unemployment rate to more than 6 percent (Powell & Takayama 1993).

The temporary workers do not appear correctly in the official statistics, but it seems that there will be a long-term structural shortage of workers at the bottom of the ladder. As earlier stated, the Japanese are not likely to take employment in the "3Ks" sector or nightclub-industry. The migration issue is quite complicated, and there are no easy solutions. There are persuasive arguments both for and against admitting foreign migrant laborers.

The population structure must also be considered. Japan has a population of

almost 125 million and the age distribution is undergoing a gradual change as both death and birth rates drop. The ageing of the population is common for most developed nations, but in the case of Japan it is accelerating at an even faster rate. This contributes to creating a shortage of labour in the future.

It is most important for Japan to decide on a long term policy in the field of migration. If it leaves the situation to the market forces, letting them decide on the need for migrant workers on a short term basis, Japan will stand to lose more in the long run, as it will be faced with an ongoing problem of illegal foreign labourers.

Literature

- Battistella, G.:** Migration in 1991: Considerations from a Review of the Press. *Asian Migrant*, Vol. 5, 1/1992.
- Dai-Ichi Kangyo Bank Economic Report 7/93**
- Fukutake, T.:** *Gendai Nihon Shakai Ron*. Tokyo Daigaku Shuppan Kai 1983.
- Japan — a Pocket guide.** Foreign Press Center/Japan 1992.
- Kiyono, K.:** Foreign Workers in Japan: An Overview. *Asian Migrant*, Vol 5, 4/1992.
- Kono, S.:** International Migration in Japan: A demographic Sketch. *Regional Development Dialogue*, vol. 12, 1991 p. 37–38.
- Nyukanho kaisei Q & A.** Syutsu nyu koku kanri hozei kenkyukai.
- Powell, B. & Takayama, H.:** The Dagger of Endaka. *Newsweek*, August 30, 1993
- Reuben, E.P.:** A False Alarm about Immigration into Japan. *International Migration Review*, Vol 27, No 1, 1993, p. 250–251.
- Sekine, M.:** Guest Worker Policies in Japan. *Migration* 1/1991. p. 49–69.
- Spencer, A.:** Illegal Migrant Laborers in Japan. *International Migration Review*, Vol 26, No 3, 1992, p. 754–786.
- SOPEMI 1992.** Japan Report. Tokyo Provisional.