

# Migrant Workers in the Post-War History of Japan

*Yasuo Kuwahara*

*Professor Emeritus, Dokkyo University*

## 1. Introduction

### Foreign Workers No Longer Uncommon

Foreign (immigrant) workers are a part of everyday life in present-day Japan. While issues involving foreign workers are, of course, often mentioned still in newspapers and TV programs, the heightened attention or excitement once seen in the 1980s is no longer to be seen among the Japanese people. On the contrary, players from abroad give outstanding performances in the professional baseball leagues, soccer J-league, and even the Japanese national sport, Sumo. There is no uncomfortable feeling between those foreign players and spectators in Japan. In fact, seeing soccer players who were once foreigners but are now naturalized earnestly singing “Kimigayo” (the national anthem) with a hand over their heart, I have somewhat mixed feelings, forgetting about the dispute over the national anthem in Japan<sup>(1)</sup>. I wonder what kind of country Japan looks like to them.

What does, on the one hand, even the heightened, excessive interest in foreign workers observable between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, when the bubble boom collapsed, and, on the other, the suddenly receding interest in them afterwards imply? If the ebbing interest indicates that Japan’s globalization has reached the stage where the Japanese accept people from abroad without any discomfort, it is not particularly difficult to understand such changes of view. Indeed, the number of non-Japanese entering the country, a mere 18,000 or so in 1950, totaled about 6.76 million in 2004, and is expected to maintain its upward trend. The number of registered foreign residents at the end of 2003 totaled a record high of 1.92 million, accounting also for a record high of 1.5 percent of Japan’s total population (Immigration Bureau, the Ministry of Justice, 2005). The estimated number of foreign residents working in Japan (apart from permanent residents) is 800,000, a full 1.3 percent (discounting those

---

<sup>(1)</sup> Since “Kimigayo” suggests the maintenance of the imperial system, quite a few people make an objection to regarding it as Japan’s national anthem.

---

entitled to reside in Japan permanently) of the labor force. All these figures undoubtedly show that foreigners are being integrated into everyday life in Japan.

### **Rekindled Interest in Foreign Workers**

But the reality perhaps is not so simple as it looks. Since the turn of the century, the interest in foreign workers has begun, if not so strongly as before, to grow again. What lies behind the rekindled interest in such workers? What is the current situation concerning the acceptance of foreign workers and their families? And how will the nature of the acceptance change in the foreseeable future? Since western countries have a long history of immigration and emigration, a large number of studies have been made on them and thus can suggest future prospects. In Japan's case, the history of such movement where Japanese emigration is concerned can be traced back to before World War II. However, this historical experience has faded away considerably by now. In order to discuss the interrelationship between Japan and foreign workers in the future it seems essential to clarify and examine its nature at least within the framework of the 60 years of the post-war history. (Here, migrants, migratory workers, foreign workers and various other terms are used interchangeably. However, this article does not differentiate these terms from one another unless otherwise specified, and follows the definition laid down by ILO (ILO, World Labor Report, p.99, 1984) that "persons, apart from refugees, travelers, pilgrims, and nomads, who have moved to countries of nationalities other than their own for the purpose in a broad sense of employment."

## **2. From a country of emigration to a country of immigration**

### **The Period of Emigration to Other Countries**

Japan's involvement with migration has been fairly complicated, even in the period after the war. In present-day Japan, a large number of foreigners classifiable as "foreign workers of Japanese descent" are in work. Their roots date back as far as the time before World War II. Japan has had a long history of sending people out abroad.

Looking at Brazil to which a large number of Japanese people emigrated, it was in 1908 that a first group of 781 people – 158 families and 10 individual emigrants – set off on the ship, “Kasato Maru,” from the port of Kobe, and arrived in the port of Santos in Brazil<sup>(2)</sup>. With the Japanese economy in a severe recession at the time, they saw no prospect of making a living at home, and decided to seek their future in the new world of Latin America.

In 1938, a Japanese novelist, Tatsuzo Ishikawa gave a vivid description of how the Japanese emigrants made up their mind to migrate to South America, how they lived in the hold of the ship for 50-odd days after the ship has departed Japan, and various other scenes, in a novel which won the first “Akutagawa Prize,” Japan’s most prestigious literary award. Determined never set foot on their native soil again, they exchange farewell cups of water with their families and relatives and leave the country.

This emigration continued after World War II. It was in 1973 that the last emigration vessel, “Nippon Maru” with 285 Japanese on board headed for Brazil, arriving in the port of Santos in March. This means that Japanese people continued to leave their own country to live in other countries until just before the first oil crisis.

The countries which those Japanese left for in the pre- and post-war periods include Canada, the United States (including Hawaii), Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina.

From the latter half of the 1980s, there was a sudden increase in the number of foreigners of Japanese descent coming from Brazil, Peru and other countries to Japan to earn a living. This so-called “U-turn” phenomenon, with Japan’s record as an emigrant nation, forms an essential part of the question of foreign workers in Japan<sup>(3)</sup>. This unpredicted phenomenon happened as a result of coincidence of the dramatic development of the post-war Japanese economy and the sluggish and highly inflated economy in Latin American countries. Let us now have a brief look at these

---

<sup>(2)</sup> See “Chronology of Migration to and from Brazil”  
[http://www.lib.city.wakayama.wakayama.jp/wkclib\\_doc/sub19.htm](http://www.lib.city.wakayama.wakayama.jp/wkclib_doc/sub19.htm)

<sup>(3)</sup> A recent TV drama that described the 70 years of Japanese immigrants to Brazil (Haru o Natsu), Produced by NHK enterprise (scenario made by S. Hashida) has been accepted with great sympathy both in Japan Brazil. <http://www.nhk.or.jp/drama/harutonstu/>

---

backgrounds in the following section.

### **Outbreak of the Oil Crisis**

In autumn 1973, the first oil crisis broke out and took a heavy toll on the world economy. Lacking crude oil and other natural resources, Japan was universally seen as the developed nation with the weakest economic foundation. Despite this, Japan sturdily weathered the crisis, thus beginning to draw attention from the world. Yet although the Japanese economy in 1970 enjoyed a high economic growth and full employment, envied all over the world – a year-on-year increase of 10.3 percent in (real) GDP and a mere 1.1 percent unemployment rate over 1969 – the oil shock drove down its GDP growth rate in 1974 to -1.4 percent over the previous year. At the same time, the unemployment rate crept up to the two-percent mark in 1976 and stayed at that level during the 1980s.

Even so, Japan swiftly got through the crisis by energy conservation and rationalization, demonstrating an extremely sound economic performance compared to other developed nations. In order to discover the secret of this success, general attention was paid to the Japanese economy, its management, industrial relations and so on. Generally speaking, the 1980s seems to have been a good time for Japan, though the economy slowed down substantially compared to the high economic growth era.

The labor market in Japan registered almost full employment in the first half of the 1970s, with the unemployment rate around the one percent mark. The rate climbed to the two percent mark as the economy continued to stagnate for a while after the oil crisis. In the 1980s, labor supply and demand tightened, and in the latter half of the 1980s, the labor supply had a shortage unprecedented since the war, behind which doubtless lies the fact that the economy took on the aspect of a “bubble” due to inflated asset prices among other things. The Plaza Accord in 1985 accelerated appreciation of the yen further.

## **3. Foreign Workers Called “Newcomers”**

### **Modern Version of the “Zipangu Myth”**

In such economic circumstances, workers from countries in Southeast

Asia and Latin America came to converge on Japan. They were quite new for Japan, except for Korean and Chinese residents in Japan who came to and settled in the country due to compulsory recruitment or other reasons before and during the war (they are sometimes called “old comers” in contrast to “new comers,” foreign workers seen after the 1980s).

Behind this lies the fact that, as direct trade investment and other economic activities by Japan expanded, the presence of Japan began to make itself felt not only in the developed countries but also in the developing ones. Until then, Japan had been physically and psychologically remote for people in developing countries in Asia and other parts of the world. But the development of transportation and communications brought them opportunities to familiarize themselves with Japanese products and local companies affiliated to Japanese firms, narrowing the distance and rapidly making Japan familiar.

In the first half of the 1980s, social attention was attracted to what was called “Japayuki san,” a term describing young foreign women from the Philippines, Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia working predominantly as entertainers in the “adult-entertainment” industry. Apart from this, word got about in some countries in East Asia that working in Japan for short periods would raise money sufficient to live off; the term “modern zipangu,” after Marco Pole, came on the scene. Looking back on things now, this all happened at the very early stage of the bubble economy in Japan.

### **The Bubble Economy and the Labor Shortage**

In the mid-1980s, the labor shortage fast became a serious problem in the manufacturing and construction industries. Despite a daily wage which appeared to be extraordinarily high by the standards of the day, some kinds of jobs were no longer receiving attention from Japanese workers, in particular young workers. The mass media labeled a bunch of such jobs the “3k” jobs – kitsui (demanding), kitanai (dirty) and kiken (dangerous). The same social climate also encouraged young persons to shun the manufacturing industry. Cold-shouldered jobs, in many cases, were low-paid and unpopular with poor labor conditions. Some jobs were shunned,

---

despite surprisingly generous wages, simply because they did not look as “smart” as white-collar office work in, for example, the service sector.

The author remembers how, when he visited Shizuoka city for a survey, an employer in the construction business told him that his company did not have a sufficient workforce for a public undertaking it was engaged in and had accepted a construction worker commuting from Tokyo in order to meet the deadline. Surprisingly, the worker commuted everyday from Tokyo to Shizuoka, 200km away, by the bullet train. At the height of the bubble boom around 1990, university graduates were in high demand everywhere. In April when students had just moved up to the fourth, final year, they were promised jobs after graduation by a number of firms. There were some episodes where students were given an opportunity of a trip to Hawaii because they had promised to join the companies.

### **Increasing Dependence on Foreign Workers**

Under these circumstances, employers desperate to secure labor began to resort to foreign workers. In particular, workers from Asian countries were flooded into jobs requiring hard manual work which could be handled by low-skilled workers – what is, somewhat oddly named “simple” labor – and were cold-shouldered by Japanese. A majority of them were from countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran which had hitherto been unfamiliar to Japan, although these were theoretically “Asian” countries.

Working in foreign countries where both the language and the customs are unfamiliar involves a certain degree of risks, so that at the first stage male workers came in without bringing their family members with them for work. From 1981 on when the economies of the oil-producing countries in the Middle East slowed down due to a drop in the oil price and a subsequent drop in revenues, workers there from Southeast Asian countries were dismissed and obliged to return home. The labor flow from Southeast Asia to the Middle East was disrupted, whereas Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and other countries and regions in East Asia were conveniently situated to absorb the surplus labor.

The large number of – then unfamiliar non-Japanese – people from Pakistan, Iran and various other countries who gathered in public parks at weekends in

Ueno, Shinjuku and other major districts in Tokyo grew increased attention from the Japanese media and public. It was believed that public parks were essential venues for them to exchange information concerning life and work in Japan – mobile telephones were not so common then as nowadays – and to make them feel relaxed for a while in a foreign country where they were unable to communicate with the people. It was also common to see foreign workers queuing in front of pay phones to make international calls to their families far away.

As the economic bubble intensified, the labor market tightened further, accelerating the flow of workers coming to Japan from these countries. They were the first body of illegal foreign residents who entered Japan mostly as tourists and stayed after the maximum permitted three months. Faced with the problem of foreign workers who opted for illegal stay and illegal employment, the Japanese government by spring 1992 suspended its visa exemption agreements with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran.

While the Japanese government officially took the stance of avoiding acceptance of unskilled workers from abroad, always saying that “it would consider the matter carefully,” firms and industries which would not be able to survive without them obviously wanted foreign workers. (The government traditionally interprets “unskilled workers” as workers whose participation in the Japanese economy may have a negative impact on the economy and society.) As the types of occupations which Japanese workers were unwilling to take on were beginning to become clear, and such preferences had become institutionalized, as it were, there was no sign of a significant decrease in the number of illegal overstays and illegal employment even in the 1990s when the economy became sluggish.

#### **4. Emergence of “Foreign Worker” Problems**

Behind such a situation, an increase in the number of foreign residents working in Japan accompanied diversification of the problems involved: various such problems had arisen which were peculiar to the presence of foreign workers and unfamiliar to Japan.

In the latter half of the 1980s, news media stirred up the public opinion by using antiquated headlines such as “arrival of the second black ships”

---

and “opening-up or closing?”. It was the first time that the presence of foreign workers was regarded as a “problem,” something controversial. As the situation evolved, the nature of the “problems” also changed, but basically the focal point of the debates deployed in the latter half of the 1980s remains unchanged until recently.

Initially in the 1980s, foreign workers were seen as someone rare and temporary: people believed that they would return to their home countries if the economic cycle of Japan entered a downward trend. In other words, they were after all regarded as workers who would not settle in Japanese society, so little attention was paid to how the situation would change in the future.

Despite this general view of foreign workers, the author (Kuwahara, 1989) raised an alert concerning this view, suggesting the necessity for long-term, comprehensive measures to deal with foreign workers on the grounds that they would be good companions in future – which, after twenty-odd years, has turned out to be a reality. Eventually, many of them have settled in Japan and become, literally, good companions. Nevertheless, the question of how deep this companionship with foreign workers and their families runs remains uncertain, together with many other questions. Let us outline the main features of these questions.

Before taking a closer look at individual questions, let us examine the legal framework concerning the eligibility of foreign residents for employment. Non-Japanese residents are entitled to engage in working activities within the scope of residential statuses stipulated by the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, alias the Immigration Control Act. The residential statuses currently available include professor, artist, religious activities, journalist, investor/business manager, legal / accounting services, medical services, researchers, instructor, engineer, specialist in humanities / international services, intra-company transferee, entertainer, skilled labor, and specified activities (working holiday, technical internship). Foreigners of six statuses – cultural activities, temporary visitor, college student, pre-college student, trainee, and dependent – are not in principle authorized to engage in work. However, college and pre-college students from abroad are allowed to work, as “activities outside the scope permitted,” for a maximum of 28 hours per week provided they have obtained a permit from the Ministry of Justice. On the other hand, there is no



**Table. Changes in Number of Foreign Workers in Japan (Estimated)**

		1990	1995	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Persons of residential statuses issued for employment purposes		67,983	125,726	154,748	168,783	179,639	168,783	185,556
Technical interns, etc. (note 1)		3,260	6,558	19,634	29,749	37,831	46,455	55,048#
“Activities outside the scope permitted” by college and pre-college students (note 2)		10,935	32,366	38,003	39,435	65,535	83,340	98,006
Foreign workers of Japanese descent (note 3)		71,803	193,748	220,844	233,187	239,744	233,897	237,808#
Illegal Foreign Workers	Illegal residents	106,497	251,697	232,121	224,047	220,552	224,047	220,552
	Workers engaged in work outside officially permitted fields (note 4)							
Total (note 5)		260,000 + $\alpha$	600,000 + $\alpha$	670,000 + $\alpha$	710,000 + $\alpha$	740,000 + $\alpha$	760,000 + $\alpha$	800,000 + $\alpha$

Source: Estimated by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare based on sources of the Immigration Bureau, the Ministry of Justice.

Notes:

- (1) Technical interns, etc.” include foreigners on “working holidays”, housemaids of diplomats and so on.
- (2) College or pre-college students who work with a permit to engage in “activities outside the scope permitted” issued by local immigration bureaus.
- (3) Foreign workers of Japanese descent are defined as those who have the residential statuses of “spouses, etc. of Japanese nationals” or “long-term residents,” are freely organized to engage in activities in Japan, and seem to be in work.
- (4) It is difficult to estimate the number of foreigners engaged in work outside their officially permitted fields.
- (5) The figures do not include the number of foreigners having the residential status of “permanent residents.”

---

restriction concerning the activities in Japan of spouses of Japanese nationals and permanent residents, and of “foreigners accorded residential statuses in accordance with their position or ranks” such as the second and third generations of foreigners of Japanese descent, who are thus officially allowed to work as they wish (Ministry of Justice, 2004).

### **Increased Number of Illegally Overstaying Foreigners**

Problems stemming from the presence of illegally overstaying foreigners and illegal foreign workers in qualifications are not necessarily unique to Japan, being shared by almost all countries which accept such foreigners. A dark shadow was also cast on problems of immigrant workers – predominantly illegal ones – by the referendums rejecting the EU Constitution in France and the Netherlands in summer 2005.

Since Japan, like the U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Taiwan, is not physically adjacent to the countries of its immigrant workers, some say that it is relatively easier to control immigration than in, say, the U.S.A. or EU countries. This is true in part, but the presence of a number of neighboring countries in Asia such as China, where there is an excess labor force, generates a considerably strong potential pressure on labor supply in Japan.

In the case of Japan, the problem lies in the fact that a large number of foreigners engage in activities (employment) different from those authorized under the residential statuses accorded them when they entered the country; where they overstay illegally, and become illegal workers.

As of January 1, 2005, the estimated number of foreigners residing in Japan illegally was approximately 210,000. In addition, the number of foreigners who have illegally landed or sneaked in and reside in Japan is estimated at some 30,000, making the total number of illegal foreign residents nearly 240,000.

Of these, the number of illegally overstaying foreigners decreased by 12,119 compared with the figure for January 1, 2004, or by 91,347 compared with 1993, when the number hit a record high of 298,646. The fall in the number implies that reinforced activities to detect illegal residents, together with various other comprehensive measures to deal with overstaying foreigners in pursuit of the governmental aim “to halve the number of illegally overstaying foreigners in five years starting in 2004 for the

purpose of restoring a safe, secure society,” have borne fruit to some extent.

Nevertheless, there is a view that all this official effort is not sufficient to check illegal employment, because of the presence of brokers for illegal foreign workers and the spread of overstaying foreigners to rural areas. This, together with an increase in the number of crimes allegedly committed by foreigners, has been recently fueling the sense of insecurity and anxiety among the Japanese people over foreigners illegally residing in the country.

### **Foreign Workers of Japanese Descent More Numerous than Expected**

Since around the end of the 1980s, various types of foreign workers have come to be seen in Japan. One of their outstanding features is an increase in the number of foreign workers of Japanese descent (*Nikkeijin*) from Brazil, Peru and other countries of Latin America. This unexpected phenomenon emerged due to the combined reasons of an overheated Japanese economy on the one hand, and, on the other, economic recession and soaring inflation in Latin American countries in the 1980s.

The phenomenon abruptly intensified in June 1990 when the Immigration Control Act was revised: the revision, aimed at setting up new categories of foreign workers to rectify the existing law to meet the trend to increase globalization, has completely legalized the residence and employment of the second- and third generations of foreigners of Japanese descent and other non-Japanese nationals. The revision has also incorporated punitive clauses applicable to employers involved in illegal employment (with reference to similar regulations enforced in the U.S.A. and other countries, such as a penalty for employers who hire a foreign worker though they are aware of the illegality.) Although the actual effect of the adoption of the punitive clauses has remained unclear, there was a growing trend towards refraining from hiring foreign workers illegally and, instead, relying on persons of Japanese descent on the right side of the law. Since there is no restriction on the economic activities of foreigners of Japanese descent, an increasingly dominant proportion of firms were taking on foreign workers of Japanese descent in the field of “unskilled labor.”

Wondering about the possible risks of hiring foreigners illegally residing in Japan to remedy labor shortages, employers of ultra-small, small and medium-sized enterprises and subcontracting firms of large firms

---

began to pay attention to persons of Japanese descent who were free from any restriction on employment. People of Japanese origin coming to Japan are, in practice, of the first, second and third generations. Legally, the different generations are treated in different manners: people of the first generation with the Japanese nationality are Japanese nationals, thus are able to freely enter and work in Japan. In fact, the increase in “foreign workers of Japanese descent” at the initial stage represented Japanese people who came back home to work. The second generation people of Japanese descent, on the other hand, rarely have Japanese nationality; they stay in Japan to visit their relatives or reside as spouses of Japanese nationals; and get employed, on these pretexts, for these reasons. And people of the third generation are able to reside and work in Japan by obtaining the residential status of “long-term residents.”

Since it is legitimate for employers to take on these workers of Japanese origin, employers worrying about the penalties of illegal hiring, and relatively large-sized business establishments wanting to take on a large number of foreign workers, have increased the number of Japanese-descended workers taken on. However, because their residing and working in Japan are legitimate, their wage levels have become to exceed that of foreign workers overstaying in Japan. Consequently, the labor market of foreign workers has been subdivided into a market for workers of Japanese descent and another one for foreigners illegally overstaying in Japan, who are taken on by ultra-small, small and medium-sized firms which cannot afford the former type of foreign workers.

On the other hand, the number of ethnic Japanese living in Latin American countries is estimated at one million and several hundred thousand, which shows how limited is the number of such persons who are able to come to Japan to work. Attempts by persons from Peru and other countries to enter Japan with forged documents purporting Japanese descent have occurred frequently.

As a result, in the occupational sphere classified as “unskilled jobs,” foreign workers of Japanese descent and illegal workers make up, in practice, for shortages of Japanese, in particular young-Japanese workers. Hiroshi Okuda, chairman of the Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren), stated (in a symposium held in December 2004 by the

Federation) that the governmental policy of “considering carefully the acceptance of unskilled workers” had already become a token acknowledgement far from the reality. Thus the leader of the nation’s employers has himself admitted that the policy of the government has lost touch with reality.

### **Undetected Arubaito by College and Pre-College Students**

Working styles among foreign workers in Japan are becoming still further varied. Arubaito (came from Arbeit meaning “work” in German) working among college and pre-college students from abroad is one such style. Needless to say, not all college and pre-college foreign students stay on in Japan as foreign workers after graduation. However, the shortcomings of the educational system in Japan, income differentials between Japan and many other countries in Asia, and the slow reactions of the Japanese government, among other things, have led to an increase in dubious working styles.

Here “college students” are definable as foreigners studying mainly at universities or advanced vocational schools, whereas “pre-college students” are mainly those studying at high schools, Japanese language schools, or various other vocational schools. The former are entitled to engage in arubaito work while they are in education for a maximum of 28 hours per week, with no obligation to report to the local authorities. The latter are entitled to engage in arubaito work for a maximum of 20 hours per week but have to report to the local authorities. Thus, in practice, quite a large proportion of these college and pre-college students have arubaito work; it is not unusual for them to work longer hours than permitted, or to fail to report to the authorities.

Nevertheless, the Japanese government has neither taken particular action nor shown its positive intentions concerning compliance with the regulations on arubaito work. Rather, it seems, by taking an obscure attitude towards the issue, to give silent consent to the fact that labor shortages for peripheral jobs in the service and other sectors are filled by these overseas students. In fact, some overseas students look no different at all from “foreign workers.” Put differently, in not a few cases one cannot tell which was the primary purpose in coming to Japan – to study or to

---

engage in arubaito work. This question, in its relation to the most desirable educational system in Japan, requires proper examination.

The numbers of new entries under the residential statuses of “college student” and “pre-college student” have been steadfastly increasing in recent years, though they ended up with the first decline in 2004, while the number of foreign nationals registered under the statuses of “college student” and “pre-college students” marked record highs.

In the latter half of the 1980s, a spate of false enrolments of foreigners at Japanese language schools was found. The incidents highlighted the fact that some foreigners, nominally enrolled at Japanese language schools, engaged in work to raise money for tuition and living expenses. The entry of a large number of college students into Japan on the pretext of studying Japanese at schools, and the resulting confusion, led to various incidents in Japan, Shanghai and other places, which developed into diplomatic problems. The Japanese government took unexpected, severe action concerning the issuance of student visas, which superficially brought the issue under control. But later in the 1990s, in another development some Japanese language schools ended up in financial straits.

### **Industrial Training Program and Its Abuse**

Another factor which has made the issue of foreign workers more complicated is the industrial training program. Some firms and industries have accepted foreign workers from countries in Asia under the name of “trainees” and made use of them as de-facto workers. The original purpose of the training program is to have them acquire skills and technology, and despite the similar nature of trainees’ activities to that of work, firms accepting trainees are not allowed under the system to pay any wage or other remuneration to trainees. Hence, trainees are paid allowances which are considerably lower than the wage level which should have been paid if they were actual workers.

The number of new entries and foreign nationals registered under the residential status “trainee” has been increasing consistently in recent years. In the meantime, the number of foreigners overstaying illegally who were once “trainees” – the number who have not returned to their countries after completion of the training program – has also been increasing.

Despite various criticisms, the number of firms which could not manage their businesses satisfactorily without foreign workers increased, too. A revision was made to the industrial training program so as to reflect the wishes of such firms; those accepting trainees were now required to spend more than one third of the time on “lectures” and to pay remuneration for “labor” during the time spent on “work” in the program.

In 1991, to assist private firms to provide training programs for foreigners, a third sector organization was established under the joint control of the former Ministry of Labour (currently, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare) and four other ministries. In April 1993, this organization, the Japan International Training Cooperation Organization (JITCO), took the lead in launching a technical internship program designed to deflect the criticism that the controversial training program had been used to allow firms to use trainees as low-paid workers. Under the newly established internship program, foreigners are allowed to work (including work as, in practice, “unskilled labor”) for a maximum of three years under the residential status of “special activities,” if their skill levels have achieved a certain standard for a certain period after completion of the internship program. The internship program thus is a device to maintain the official policy of not accepting unskilled labor from abroad, while letting foreigners, in practice, work as such.

Once the internship program came into force, it immediately exposed its defects, though these had already been anticipated at the time when adoption of the program was considered. Some employers began to use trainees at factories and other production sites simply by paying “training allowances.” Trainees on their side cannot make their wishes clear to their employers, fearing the effect on their treatment in future. Foreigners who have come to Japan to participate in the training and internship programs, and their countries as a whole, see them as a route to employment in Japan. This is proved by surveys carried out abroad which suggest that the programs are considered to be a mere excuse for Japan to accept unskilled labor. As a result, the programs, opening up a loophole for unskilled labor from abroad, are liable to abuse. The Japanese government attempts to check such abuse within the operational framework of the programs, but this seems to be impossible. The Japan Business Federation and other

---

employers, on the other hand, aware of the presence of the above-mentioned institutional problems, see it as difficult to reform programs which are already established at a deep level.

Many users of the training program are small and medium-sized firms which are incapable of providing satisfactory training programs by themselves but are faced with serious labor shortages, whereas the foreign workers involved are keenly eager to work in Japan. Under such circumstances, technical interns are accepted in a wide range of industries such as fishery processing, textiles, metal processing, and agriculture.

In order to keep the programs running in the interests of technological assistance to developing countries, it will be necessary to revise the current situation based on compromise between training and employment, which is vulnerable to abuse, clearly separate the two factors as different schemes, and reorganize the programs with increased transparency.

### **Slow Increase in the Number of Workers in Specialized and Technological Fields**

The number of new entries of foreigners with the official documents required for entry who legally entered Japan and applied for residential status with work permission (apart from “diplomat” and “government business”) totaled 158,877 in 2004, and the number of registered foreigners who have followed the foregoing process was 185,556 as of the end of 2003; both figures have been increasing in recent years. Since around 1990, when direct investment in Japan started to surge, an increasing number of foreign executives and workers in managerial posts have arrived in Japan. What is more, in fields where the worldwide struggle for talent is intensifying, Japan is exposed to competition with the U.S.A. and the nations of Western Europe, thus attracting fewer talented workers partly because it is not an English-speaking country. Despite the officially stated readiness of the Japanese government to accept workers in specialized and technological fields, the number of those who actually come to Japan has not increased so much as expected.

In recent years, worldwide demand for highly skilled workforce, particularly those in information technology have greatly increased, Firms move or expand some of their operations and jobs to overseas locations,



which are referred to as off-shoring. Often, jobs are transferred to India, China and others via Internet. It is not certain at the present stage how far the new pattern will change the nature of immigrants and foreign workers in the future.

The acceptance of highly specialized, skilled foreign workers represents a pivotal issue for advanced countries. It is highly likely, thanks to rapid progress in Internet technology, that outsourcing may become more common in the field of engineering requiring sophisticated technologies.

Where the acceptance of nurses and caregivers from abroad is concerned, – a primary issue in negotiations over economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with Southeast Asian countries – Japan seems too conservative. Burdens are apparently heavy in the medical and nursing care services, and it is obvious that the situation will become serious sooner or later with the ageing population. In the meantime, working abroad is attracting nowadays nurses in the Philippines and elsewhere, leading to a considerable deterioration in the quality of medical and nursing specialists in their own countries. This suggests that, unless the relationship between parties involved is carefully laid down, it is likely that the welfare standards in those countries will deteriorate, even if the nurses and other workers who go abroad are themselves able to enjoy higher income levels. It will be necessary to construct, with mutual cooperation, a mechanism of “skill circulation,” whereby the experience of immigrant workers in foreign countries can contribute to the healthy development of their own countries.

## **5. Future Tasks**

More than 20 years have passed since the number of what are called newcomers in Japanese society started to increase. During these years, there has been no particular discussion of the issue from the long-term perspective, but the actual situation forged over the years has become an accomplished fact; an increasing number of foreigners have settled here, and various difficult problems have arisen. There are still quite a few employers who treat foreign workers as a control valve for the domestic labor market, believing that they can cut or increase their workforce from abroad freely in response to business fluctuations. At the same time, there

---

are many firms and industries by now which rely heavily on foreign workers and could not survive if they returned home. Faced with the rapid lowering of the birthrate and ageing of the population, together with the mass retirement of the post-war baby boom generation, calls are intensifying again for the acceptance of foreign workers. However, discussions in many cases differ little from those of the latter half of the 1980s.

For example, in the latter half of the 1980s when the number of such workers began to increase, the shortcomings of the “vertically-divided administrative systems” affecting the acceptance of foreign workers were already acknowledged and the need for measures which would incorporate the “social dimension” was being stressed (Hanami and Kuwahara [1989] and [1993]), but nothing has been discussed at the governmental level. Finally, the Japan Business Federation included the issue in its proposals for a “Third Basic Plan for Immigration Control.” Taking into account that most of the problems concerning foreign nationals in present-day Japan have arisen in areas outside the scope of immigration control, it is undoubtedly necessary to create a comprehensive administrative unit to integrate a series of measures taken by various, mutually-independent ministries and agencies.

The majority of the media still adopt for the tone that Japan should be “internationalized” or “open its doors” to the world, yet the grounds for their claims are not necessarily clear. Sometimes the term “internationalization” is used in reality to merely express the interests of employers and others concerned. Some point out that the proportion of foreign residents to the whole population is not as high as in western countries. However, compared to western countries with long histories of immigration, it is a mere 20 years since foreign workers called “newcomers” became a common sight in Japan. It is somewhat too early to demand Japan open up its doors more widely simply on the grounds that the proportion of foreigners in Japan is lower than the several to 10 percent of countries of Western Europe, with their long experience. The number of foreigners settling in Japan has been steadily growing, so that the proportion of non-Japanese to the population, assuming that the trend continues, will no doubt reach the level of today’s European countries in the near future. The

real problem lies somewhere utterly different.

The problem is the fact that it is almost impossible for the Japanese to see what the government's policy for foreign workers and immigrants is aiming at. In particular, the policy lacks a comprehensive vision based on a long-term viewpoint. One cannot even tell who, in the government, is responsible for drawing up measures. The government should seek for consistency and transparency in its measures, as well as the establishment of one single responsible administrative body, taking into account the steady increase in foreigners settling in Japan. There is an urgent need to consider basic policies, and the main issues to be considered will be suggested in the following sections.

### **How to Deal with the Increased in Foreigners Settling in Japan**

First, the number of foreign workers who have settled in Japan has been steadily increasing, thus can be clearly seen in trends in the number of registered foreigners. As a result, foreign workers and their family members are no longer stared at with curiosity, and have started to live in various widely spaced areas of Japan. At the same time, as is typical among Japanese-descended Brazilians, many foreigners have gathered in particular areas or communities. In such areas, there are quite a few automobile, electrical and other manufacturing sites, where the number of foreign workers, mainly contract foreign workers, has continued to increase, so that now they are essential workforce. Some workers have brought over their families, the tendency to settle in Japan strengthening. As more and more foreigners have settled in Japan, more tasks to be solved have come to the fore, not only concerning employment but concerning housing, education, medical services, social security, and relations with neighboring Japanese citizens also. So far, in areas with many foreign residents, local authorities and citizens have taken initiatives in dealing with these. Although the government officially claimed that it did not allow in foreign workers in the field of unskilled labor, individual areas and communities have, in practice, been obliged to accept and deal with unskilled foreign workers. And with no fundamental measures taken, problems have become increasingly difficult. Six prefectures and 15 cities and towns, including Shizuoka, Aichi, Mie, Gifu, Gunma, and Nagano prefectures, have therefore established a

---

the Council for Cities with Non-Japanese Residents, exchanging information and discussing various measures to tackle shared tasks. The Council held its first conference in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka prefecture, and had three conferences by 2004. The participation in the council of the Japan Business Federation, an employers' organization, is ideal in considering specific questions concerning foreign workers.

Problems affecting labor issues referred to at recent conferences include the failure to improve the working environment: for instance, non-participation in the social insurance scheme despite the increased number of foreigners settling in Japan. The council has presented to the government a number of requests including (i) effective implementation of the revised Worker Dispatch Law; (ii) improvement of vocational training activities addressed to foreigners of Japanese descent; and (iii) faster implementation of steps to encourage longer-staying foreigners to participate in the social insurance scheme.

One crucial task is to discuss further the settlement of foreigners. Among illegal foreign residents in Japan, some have stayed long enough to, marry Japanese citizens, have children born in Japan, or receive education in Japan, etc. Because of such changes, an increasing number of foreigners have become so deeply rooted in Japanese society that they find it, in practice, difficult to return to their home countries. The same problem is shared by *Nikkeijin* and other foreigners legally entering and residing in Japan.

The Ministry of Justice has recently announced a number of special cases where illegal foreign residents can be given an official residential permit, but still "settlement with no future prospect" has continued. More specifically, in 2003 the ministry gave nearly 10,000 illegal foreign residents the legal status of "special permits of residence" before, in practice, deporting them.

This problem necessarily requires discussion in relation to the graying of society and the declining birthrate. Japan's total population is expected to start falling after reaching a peak in 2006, which poses questions about the handling of foreign workers and the administration of immigrant control.

The United Nations Population Division has suggested the idea of "replacement migration," but this was merely a provisional conjecture;

what kind of policies will Japan in fact follow in response to the rapid graying of its population? What options will be available for Japan in dealing with the labor shortage, the ageing of the labor force and other problems? Little discussion at the level of the ordinary citizens has taken place so far, but time is passing and considerations of, and responses to, the problems lag farther and farther behind.

### **Policy towards Illegal Foreign Residents and Traffic in Human Beings**

Although the number of foreigners overstaying illegally is now below the level marked at its peak, it is still large and causes various problems in various fields. Crimes committed by foreigners in recent years, which have increased considerably in number, involve in many cases foreigners illegally overstaying in Japan. The government is aiming at halving the number by 2008, but is vague about the relationship between this objective and its overall, long-term standpoint on foreign workers. The number of forged or altered documents concerning immigration control discovered has been increasing as a whole, and it also seems that, due to the involvement of domestic and overseas traffickers in illegal immigrants, the methods of trafficking are becoming nastier and more sophisticated.

Meanwhile, trafficking in women and children has been attracting worldwide attention, and on July 12, 2005, a revised Criminal Law and Immigration Control Act were put into effect. The many cases of trafficking involved a number of brokers both at home and abroad. In 2004, the number of trafficking cases detected by the National Police Agency totaled 79.

### **To avoid creating invisible boundaries<sup>(3)</sup>**

One question which those who have studied and researched issues related to foreign workers from the very first stage have had in mind constantly is what is the meaning of “true acceptance of foreign workers”? Surveys of regions where a large number of foreigners reside make one realize that a wall has been imperceptibly built up between their communities and the neighboring Japanese society. In the 1980s, the fact that the number

---

<sup>(4)</sup> Some descriptions in this statement overlap parts of Kuwahara (2004).

---

of foreigners living nearby had increased drew attention from local communities and authorities. At the time there was certainly communication between the two parties, though they were still groping for ways of achieving it. But nowadays, as the number of foreign workers has inevitably increased so that local firms and industries can survive, more Japanese people seem to be unwilling to get involved with such workers. Partly due to the shortcomings of the alien registration system, local governments do not realize how many foreigners reside within their jurisdictions. Local governments with a large number of foreigners have made various efforts to achieve co-existence with local people, but many of them feel their hands tied in filling the gap between reality and the schemes and steps available to them. As time has passed, a kind of enclave isolated by invisible walls from the local population has come into existence.

Quite a few foreigners who are dispatched by agencies to workplaces have no particular communication with Japanese people, having contact only with their fellows, and an everyday life consisting of shuttling between their apartments and workplaces. There are foreign families who have been in Japan for several years, but have neither socialized with Japanese people nor sent their children to local primary school. They have been busy making ends meet, with no particular outside support, while time has been going by.

While some borders – for example, in the newly expanded EU – are disappearing due to globalization, “unseen borders” are being built within the boundaries of individual countries. These invisible barriers are forms of social discrimination or the isolation of specific races or nationalities, and are sometimes created deliberately for political purposes. Yet it is not solely the countries having immigrants, or their people, are responsible for these barriers, since it is natural for people of the same country to stick together. It is easy to talk theoretically about “social integration” or “co-existence,” but realizing them is full of difficulties. What should be done to prevent the building “invisible boundaries?” We are still in the trial-and-error stage in seeking for answers to these questions. What is true “globalization”? We must first begin by looking into our own hearts. The essential things are: steady efforts to strengthen dialogue and communication at the level of individual local communities; reorganize the points for discussion at the

national level; and revise and clarify policies in accordance with the reworked discussion. It may be no exaggeration to say that Japan's future will depend on such efforts.

## References

Hanami, Tadashi and Kuwahara Yasuo (ed.) "Asu no Rin-jin: Gaikoku-jin Rodo-sha" (Our Future Companions – Foreign Workers). Toyo Keizai Shimpo-sha, 1989.

------. "Anata no Rin-jin: Gaikoku-jin Rodo-sha" (Your Companions – Foreign Workers). Toyo Keizai Shimpo-sha, 1993.

Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice. (ed.) "Shutsu-nyukoku Kanri, 2004" (Immigration Control, 2004). Ainet, 2004.

Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice. "Dai-3-ji Shutsu Nyukoku Kanri Kihon Keikaku" (Third Basic Plan for Immigration Control), March, 2005.

Ishikawa, Tatsuzo. "Sou Bou", Shincho-sha, 1935.

Kajita, Takamichi, Tanno Kiyoto, Higuchi Naoto. "Kao no Mienai Teijyu-ka: Nikkei Brazil-jin to Kokka, Sijo, Imin-network" (Faceless Settlers: Brazilians of Japanese Descent and State, the Market and the Immigrant Network). Nagoya University Press, 2005.

Kuwahara, Yasuo. "Kokkyo wo Koeru Rodo-sha" (Workers across National Borders), Iwanami Shoten, 1991.

------. "Mieru Kokkyo / Mienai Kokkyo" (Visible Borders, Invisible Borders) in "Nihon Rodo Kenkyu Zasshi, No. 531, October 2004.

Japan Business Federation. "Gaikoku-jin Ukeire Mondai ni kansuru Teigen" (Recommendations on Accepting Non-Japanese Workers), April 14, 2004.

"Chronology of Migration to and from Brazil"

[http://www.lib.city.wakayama.wakayama.jp/wkclib\\_doc/sub19.htm](http://www.lib.city.wakayama.wakayama.jp/wkclib_doc/sub19.htm)

Website of the Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice. (Partial Amendment of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, enacted on July 12, 2005).

<http://www.moj.go.jp/NYUKAN/nyukan39.html>