

Opening Doors: The Japanese Immigration Policy

Japan is undergoing a transition. For the past few decades, “one ethnic group, one language” has been seen as an important concept for the striking economic development in Japan (as cited in Yamanaka, 1993). Once reduced to rubble after World War II, Japan regained its power and has now risen into a world class trading nation. We need not deny the minority races such as the Ainu and the Ryukyuan, but the country has had a unique way of reaching its goals together as “one,” without depending on imported labor. However, Sadakiyo (2009) noted that the population of immigrants in Japan is steadily rising in the years; from 600 thousand in the post war era to 2.3 million in 2007. Perhaps this is a result of globalization, but we can also say that Japan is changing—slowly awakening from its unique mono-ethnic culture. This is because the government needs to make urgent measures to deal with its heavy responsibilities. Today the Japanese worry about its aging population and its low birthrate, which means an increase in social security fees and a decline in the working force. Furthermore, Fackler and Tabuchi (2010) examine in their article, the political unrest in Japan; they point out the “leadership crisis” (para. 6) that Japan faces, since a number of prime ministers have flip-flopped with short office terms in the past few years. In fact the public debt is twice the size of the economy, and people are now feeling anxious about the

country's situation. Robert Dujarric (2010) has noted that Japanese people are also anxious about the growing power of China, and are therefore considering immigration as a tool to expand its role in the Asian world. The growing sense of crisis is causing debates in political and economical circles about the influences of opening doors to multiculturalism. This paper will look at whether Japan should alter its racial homogeneity, by inviting more foreigners into the country to form a new labor force. Will the diversity save our economy and enhance our social vitality? This essay searches for a desirable future direction for Japan in the 21st century, by analyzing the positive and negative aspects of migration.

The arguments in favor of foreign workers center on the idea that they will be beneficial to the serious problems that challenge the Japanese society. Today Japan faces an increase in the aging population and a sharp decline in birthrates. Its population has been falling since 2005, and by 2050 the population will have declined by a quarter to 90 million ("Japan's struggle," 2007). Soon, one out of six people will be over 80 years old, and in 10 years there will be 3 pensioners for every child under 15 (Collinson, 2010). A new labor pool will be necessary for sustaining the manufacturing capacity, and in fact many immigrant workers are welcomed in small business companies as a cheap, adaptable work force. Japan also needs to catch up on a competitive race of seeking skilled workers from other parts of the world. Enyo (2010) noted that the Justice Ministry plans to take in researchers, doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs based on a new immigration policy using a point system. Of

blue-collared workers, about 366,000 Brazilians and Peruvians now live in Japan, as the country provided a myriad of special work visas in 1990 as a solution to the desperate need of labor force (Tabuchi, 2009). Also, Sadakiyo (2009) mentions in her report that a large number of nurses and care workers from Indonesia and the Philippines are active today based on the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Japan and East Asia. Yamanaka (1993) stated that these cultural exchanges will transfer our technology and knowledge to developing nations, and will promote good relations between Japan and its neighbors.

Moreover, given that the current exchange rate of yen is rising, the domestic industry is hollowing out. Japan is alarmed by the lack of self-sufficiency in agricultural fields, since it's running short of working force. Forecasts indicate that accepting foreign workers into our country will enlarge the population and lower the price levels in Japan. Hosting foreign workers will definitely ease the decline in our economical growth rate, and the mounting social security costs. Hosting foreign workers not only has merits for Japan, but also it will spur development and employment in the immigrants' home countries. For instance, by allowing Filipino nurses to work in Japan, we improve not only their situation, but through remittances, the lot of their family back and will also benefit. For these reasons, racial homogeneity might not be so important in the globalized society—clearly, relaxing the immigration policy will play a constructive role in the socio-economic reform process.

While those who support the diversity tend to be broad-minded, opponents say it as an immature plan. Taro Kono, the ex-head of panel in the justice ministry has remarked in 2006: “Some countries accept five or ten percent [of foreign workers], but that would be absolutely impossible for Japan” (“Japan’s immigration quandary,” 2006, para 1). Also, a similar comment was made by the former secretary of treasury Naoto Kann on April 12, 2010: “If we allow immigrant numbers to make up 5% of the population of Japan, some kind of friction is likely to occur between the citizens. I am personally against it” (Youzo, 2010, para.1, translated from the Japanese article by Yuko Kozu). Although Japan has been considering a more open immigration policy for years, the truth is that a majority is arguing that it will harm social order. Factors that make Japanese citizens worry are public security problems caused by illegal aliens. According to government research, there are 250,000 illegal immigrants in Japan; most of them have entered the country with temporary visas and have overstayed (“Japan mulls multicultural dawn,” 2004). Unskilled immigrants have been suffering unemployment in the recent economy downturn, and as a result they tend to turn to crime. In a research paper titled “What Triggers Public Opposition to Immigration? Anxiety, Group Cues, and Immigration Threat,” Brader, Valentino, and Suhay (2008) have suggested that the growth of anxiety and opposition to immigration depends upon the group cues of foreigners. The territorial disputes of the Senkaku Islands in October have aggravated China-Japan relations, and these diplomatic quarrels may antagonize the immigrants living in the

nation (“China accused of invading,” 2010). In addition, foreign workers are often discriminated against. Yamanaka (1993) notes that “unskilled workers from Third World countries are subject to various kinds of exploitation and discrimination” (p. 84, para. 2). Japan has not yet structured effective language education programs for the migrants, and they often remain unfamiliar with Japan’s labor customs, in spite of living here. Kashiwazaki (2002) stated that many illegal immigrants that overstay in Japan are often placed in “3K” jobs—“kitsui (demanding),” “kitanai (dirty),” and “kiken (dangerous).” The government is doing little to protect foreigners from such exploitation, and in fact Japan does not have any legislation outlawing racial discrimination. When a Ghanaian man who was being deported from Japan died after being forced onto his plane, activists protested about the conditions detainees face and claimed that officials at detention centers are violating the human rights of detainees (Matsutani, 2010). There are criticisms over strict programs to educate East Asian nurses, since 33 care takers have failed requirement tests and returned home in July 2010 (Harlan, 2010). Without reviewing its immigration policy and inferior working conditions, the wage gap between Japanese and non-Japanese workers will grow. People who argue against an open immigration policy believe that Japan is not yet ready for embracing a multiethnic society.

Overall, both sides have persuasive arguments on the issue. Hosting more immigrants will definitely effect Japan’s socio-economic growth, in both positive and negative ways.

Accepting people from different cultures and languages involve many responsibilities, and the country needs to be careful in order to avoid violent clashes between both groups; an example of an unsuccessful immigration policy can be seen in France. Smith (2005) has reported that the second and third generation immigrants in France, who are mostly Arabs from North Africa, have suffered a long time from unemployment and marginalization. Japan should make strict regulations in controlling illegal workers but with a warm heart, since welcoming unskilled workers should not be a disguised form of cheap, easy labor.

Unemployment among the Nikkeijin (Japanese people who have emigrated and their descendants) is a serious problem in industrial areas, and should be addressed immediately.

The political anxiety and the recession caused by the strong yen suggest that the Japanese society lacks stability, and thus is unprepared for accepting a large number of foreign workers.

Columnist Daniel Gross (2009) has expressed in his article his feelings towards the Japanese policy, saying that the government seems to be strangely passive about the demographic crisis. He criticizes that though many booklets are made on the need for new immigration policies and work-life issues, “no real policies” (para. 7) have yet to be seen. In April, Naoto Kann stated that accepting a great number of immigrants would be dangerous. However, two months later in June 2010, when he became Prime Minister, he outlined a goal to double the number of highly skilled foreign workers in Japan within the decade (Harlan, 2010). In the “Basic Plans for Immigration Control” penned by the Immigration Bureau, the

government suggests only allowing “High-Qualified Human Resources” in the country, which means a focus on skilled workers (Ministry of Justice, p. 21, para. 4). Perhaps mass immigration should be bypassed for the present time, but a gradual step towards accepting foreigners should be made for the future, starting with skilled immigrants. The government should endeavor to raise public awareness about immigration issues, which will stimulate more needed debates. We cannot avoid globalization and migration trends. Administrative officers are delaying to tackle these migration problems, but urgent and thoughtful change is needed.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that Japan is changing. From being a country with one ethnic group, it is starting to receive foreigners from all over the world. Opening its doors to immigrants may brighten the future of Japan in unexpected ways—revitalizing the nation with fresh minds, culture, and energy. However it is necessary for Japan to overhaul its immigration policy, and the citizens should be ready to embrace cultural changes. I believe that Japan can prove itself capable, ready, and willing to overcome its obstacles and grow into a multi-cultural society.

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