



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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The Coming Internationalization: Can Japan assimilate its immigrants?

By Arudou Debito

With the recent ethnic riots in France, The Economist (London) ran a thoughtful article ("[Minority Reports](#)") on their causes. It posed an important question: Why are some countries able to assimilate immigrants and their children more peacefully than others? It took a stab at comparing "integrationist" vs. "assimilationist" public policies in France, England, Germany, Holland, and the United States.

Naturally, the article did not mention Japan, as Japan does not have much of a record regarding immigration. Registered foreigners (i.e. those with legal visas staying for more than three months), assuming previous growth rates continued through 2005, probably topped two million for the first time in postwar Japan. However, in a country of 127.7 million, this amounts to 1.6% of the total population--slender compared to 4.6% (2003) in Britain, 5.5% (1999) in France, 9.7% (2002) in Germany, 12.1% (2005, legal and illegal) in the US, and 21.8% (2001) in Australia. [1]

However, these figures will change, as Japan's population of foreigners will continue to grow. I believe Japan's future as a multiethnic society is inevitable. As I argued in a Japan Times [column](#) ("Japan and the Immigration Issue"), not only is cheap foreign labor an intrinsic part of the Japanese economy, but also, as the regional economic superpower, Japan is still by itself about the same size as all the other Asian economies combined. The economic pull for immigrants is irresistible.

Immigration to Japan is already happening and it will not stop

Things are changing, most noticeably in the makeup of the non-Anglophone population. Now comprising more than 75% of total registered foreign residents, this steady growth is no accident.

But first, a bit of background. For much of Japan's postwar history, the majority of "foreigners" here were, surprisingly, born or raised in Japan--the product of immigration, both forced and unforced, by former citizens of the prewar Japanese Empire and their progeny. Called "Special Permanent Residents" (tokubetsu eijusha), or "Zainichi" in the vernacular, they are mostly Koreans and Chinese, who (because Japan only confers citizenship through blood or naturalization) have remained in Japan for generations as "foreigners". This is despite the fact they are fully fluent in Japanese and quite indistinguishable from the general population--except for ethnic expression, personal identity (of the non-naturalized Zainichis I have interviewed, none have ever said they consider themselves "Japanese"), access to jobs and marriage partners, and legal treatment (about the same as any foreigner fresh off the boat, unfortunately).

That was then. From 1990 a new wave of immigration began. The Japanese government tried to stem the "hollowing out" of domestic industry by providing a special "trainee worker" visa for the Nikkei diaspora. Consequently, the number of registered "returnee" Brazilians alone has leapt from negligible to around 280,000 in 2005, lodging them in third place behind the Zainichi. These South American laborers are more visible than the Zainichi, clustering to the point where, in some small towns in Shizuoka, Aichi, and Gifu prefectures, they comprise a startlingly high percentage of the local population--sometimes even double digits. Given the high standard of living here and the lack of job opportunities back home, many are settling down and changing the face of their communities. They are also changing the commonly-held image of "gaijin" (foreigner), which was (roughly) "someone from a developed country who larks about teaching English, then goes home". Foreigners are graduating from "temporary guest" to immigrant.

"Resistance is futile": the trends favoring immigration are irreversible

To better grasp the pressures on Japanese society towards immigration, let's first consider what would happen if the government took steps to reverse the trend: removing foreigners from Japan by cracking down on illegals, curbing visa programs, targeting them through anti-terrorist measures (in fact already in the pipeline, see Japan Times, "[Here Comes the Fear](#)"), or even increased racial profiling (entirely feasible, given the recent shocking murder of a schoolgirl allegedly by a Peruvian here on forged papers). Foreigners will come to Japan regardless. Why? They will continue to be attracted by Japan's economic opportunities (as the decades-unbroken rise in the foreign population demonstrates). More importantly, Japanese companies (especially those in the "3K" industrial sectors which Japanese laborers avoid) will still want them. According to prominent economic magazine Shukan Diamondo (June 5, 2004), Japan's 760,000 foreign workers are now powering companies like Toyota, Suzuki, Sanyo, Honda, and Yamaha. During a 2004 crackdown on Chinese due to fears of SARS, factories in rural regions like Shikoku simply closed down. Thus any drastic action against foreigners will have severe economic effects.

Moreover, these "newcomer" foreigners are making themselves unremovable, by taking out Permanent Residency (eijukken). According to the [Ministry of Justice](#), the number of "General Permanent Residents" (ippan eijusha) swelled from 145,336 in 2000 to 312,964 in 2004. Meanwhile, the number of "oldcomer" Permanent-Resident Zainichi actually shrank (due to death or naturalization) from 512,269 to 465,619. If this trend continues, the permanent Newcomers will outnumber Oldcomers in just a few years, a sea change in terms of visible immigration and acculturation.

On top of that, it is simply impossible for "foreigners" and their influence in Japan to disappear--for so many of the people who once might have been considered "foreign" are now even citizens. There are large and growing numbers of multiethnic Japanese, thanks to the record numbers of international marriages and international children, the number of naturalized citizens, and even (to give an extreme example) Japan's role as [safe haven](#) for abducted Japanese children following international divorces. Moreover, people do naturalize--to the tune of 12,000 to 14,000 people per year in recent years (the author of this article included); according to the Ministry of Justice, there were more than 300,000 newly-minted citizens between 1968 and 2001. Of course, all of these trends, which amount to no less than Japan's true internationalization, are invisible because these people are not included in numbers for registered foreigners, and Japan's Census Bureau does not measure the population for ethnicity.

In fact, it seems the tide is turning--back towards a grudging acceptance of the inevitability of immigration. And none too soon. As far back as 2000, under the Obuchi Administration, "The Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century" (as well as the UN) famously advised Japan to import around 600,000 people per annum. This would maintain Japan's tax base, and ameliorate the effects of record-high longevities and record-low birthrates contributing to an aging population. Even though this trial balloon was soon deflated, through government-sponsored public scares about hooliganism (during the [2002 World Cup](#)) and terrorism, and assiduous reportage on purported rises in [foreign crime](#), cooler heads have since prevailed, running some fanciful proposals up the flagpole, such as bringing in Filipina nurses or robotizing elderly health care (see pie-in-the-sky Economist [article](#) "Japan's Humanoid Robots--Better Than People"). However, a watershed was inevitable, and it came in December 2005--due to demographics.

In the realm of a shrinking population

It's official: As of 2006, Japan's population is in decline. Japan's Ministry of Health announced that, thanks to the declining birthrate, deaths in 2005 outnumbered births by 10,000. [2] From 2006 the population is projected to dwindle, falling from 127.4 million to 100.7 million by 2050. This means that the

foreign resident influx, about 50,000 people per year, is keeping the numbers in the black, at least for now.

The subsequent intake of wind from policy circles and pundits was audible. Even frequent foreigner basher Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro, in a December 22, 2005 [press conference](#) (minute 11), stated that Japan needs a firm immigration policy, and offered suggestions (such as granting Permanent Residency to foreign graduates of Japanese colleges) to make it easier for educated people to stay.

So now that people know that Japan needs foreigners, warts and all, how equipped is Japan to deal with a future of immigration?

Getting foreigners to stay and find "the good life" here

Can Japan allow foreigners to reach their potential, become productive and contributing members of Japanese society, without the prospect (as Governor Ishihara warned in his infamous 2000 "Sankokujin Speech") of unrest and rioting?

The Economist article, which opened this essay, concluded that peaceful immigrant assimilation requires five basic things: a) lingua franca skills, b) income, c) mobility, d) home ownership, e) political representation, and e) intermarriage. How does Japan rate?

Factors conducive to assimilation

1) Japanese law allows foreigners to own property, which means they can buy homes and establish businesses in Japan. However, without Permanent Residency, they face great difficulty getting loans at competitive interest rates. Permanent Residency, it should be noted, is actually quite difficult to get, as it requires at least five years' investment (if married to a Japanese, ten years' if not) and paperwork showing commitment and [financial stability](#). That said, with the striking rise in people taking out PR, unprecedented numbers are qualifying for credit.

2) Foreigners can and do found and run their own businesses (as the ethnic restaurants, kitchen-sink importers, used-goods exporters, and nightlife around Japan attest). Naturally, there are some barriers to entry. Based upon your visa, you may face a local-hire requirement or a local-guarantor requirement, with heavy deposits for business loans. Moreover, even credit card companies and cellphone operators like NTT Docomo, consider foreigners too risky or fly-by-night. [denying them credit](#) avenues or requiring deposits without looking at credit records or income.

However, things have been loosening up, for example, "1-yen companies", and open-secret loopholes (such as getting a visa separate from your business, and treating your business as a side-job). [3] More concretely, setting up a company in Japan is no longer all that difficult. According to the World Bank's [International Finance Corporation](#), start-up costs for a company in Japan (around US\$4,000), number of days you have to wait for paperwork to clear (31), and number of procedures you have to go through (11), are expensive but not unreasonable for the region (average: 52.6 days' wait, 8.2 procedures). Indeed, Japan is even less cumbersome albeit more expensive than China (US\$175 start-up, 48 days' wait, 13 procedures). However, Japan is uncompetitive compared to the high-income OECD countries (average: 19.5 days' wait, 7.9 procedures), particularly France (US\$350 start-up, 8 days' wait, 7 procedures), Germany (US\$1400 start-up, 24 days' wait, 9 procedures), the USA (US\$210 start-up, 5 days' wait, 5 procedures), and Canada (US\$250 start-up, 3 days' wait, 2 procedures). Based on raw numbers alone, Japan is actually on par with countries like Russia, Egypt, Malawi, and Jordan. And these numbers do not reflect things like Japan's informal barriers to capital access for newcomers, and minimum capital investment in banks to qualify for loans. Nevertheless, this represents considerable easing of restrictions on foreign enterprise startups in Japan.

3) Unemployment rates are nominally low in Japan and there is a labor shortage, meaning chances are there will be little indigency: You come here, you will probably find a job. That's not to say, however, that employment is secure or lucrative. According to Louis Carlet of the [National Union of General Workers](#), Tokyo Nambu office, 90% or all foreigners in Japan are on fixed-term contract labor. Low incomes for the most recent newcomers (such as the above-mentioned "trainees") are not necessarily helping them invest in their future.

4) There are few, if any, clearly-delineated "foreigner enclaves" in Japan (as opposed to France's state-supported banlieue, the scene of much unrest). However, there is little or no protection against housing discrimination, which results in the creation of "gaijin apartments" and de facto "foreigner zones" in towns near factories.

5) There is a promising degree of cultural acceptance and social mobility for multiethnic residents and cultural expression. There have been recent booms in Korean pop culture, African-American rap culture, even international marriage in Japan's huge manga market. A cursory view of Japanese media will demonstrate that Japanese are culinary culture vultures for foreign foods. Foreign entertainers and sportspeople are highly visible (even if many of the long-term TV personalities choose to hide their ethnic roots). There are even politicians and prominent businesspeople with international backgrounds (even if the foreign community has yet to become a recognizable voting or consumer bloc). Nevertheless, there are jobs from which foreigners are excluded (see below), "foreigner quotas" in many areas, such as sports, even "no foreigners" rules in some [sports leagues](#).

And of course:

6) Tens of thousands of foreigners marry Japanese every year, including high rates of Zainichi intermarriage and recent migrant intermarriage. That's the strongest possible root for any non-Japanese resident, and it opens doors in terms of working visas and community standing.

Factors unconducive to assimilation

1) Unlike Japanese children, foreign children are not required to attend school. This means that the government has turned a blind eye to a growing underclass of uneducated children just because they are foreign. Moreover, until recently, the Ministry of Education refused to recognize most international schools as accredited educational institutions. Result: Many foreign children who couldn't handle a Japanese grade or junior-high school dropped out. With few other educational choices, some grew up illiterate and found their way into youth gangs (cf. the Herculano Murder Case). Foreign children who do graduate from an unaccredited ethnic school in Japan, like one set up by Koreans and Brazilians, are generally unable to enter a Japanese university and thus are shut out from most upwardly-mobile jobs. Though there have been some steps to accredit ethnic schools at long last, and universities, desperate for students, are increasingly accepting ethnic school diplomas, it is too late for some teens; we don't know--we have no official recognition of the problem or data on its depth. Japan may soon be in for a surprise, with future incidents redolent of the youth riots in France.

2) Foreigners are still barred from some job sectors, most famously government-sponsored food preparation (for "security reasons") and firefighting ("because foreigners damaging Japanese property could create an international incident", runs the argument). Glass ceilings in Japan's entry-level corporate culture are rife. Foreigners are still not permitted to sit civil-service examinations for promotion in certain regions, such as Tokyo, because "foreigners cannot be permitted to have administrative duties over Japanese" (cf. the [law suit](#) by health worker Zainichi Korean Chong Hyang Gyun).

2) Foreigners are not entitled to the same job security, social security, or [legal protections](#) as Japanese. One consequence is that many work either in the black-market economies or for severely low wages, without social safety nets such as health or unemployment insurance. This does not encourage the establishment of firm or honest roots, or a larger stake in society.

3) Japan keeps its foreigners on separate and tight (moreover, tightening) leash, while the Zainichi are denied the rights of citizens even after four generations here. The Zainichi and others who decide to fully assimilate, that is, naturalize, often do so at great [sacrifice](#) of their ethnicity and family ties. There is also a perception problem fostered by the government: Many policy proposals are written so as to apply exclusively to "kokumin" (citizens), as if official definitions of "community members deserving social benefits and protections" are rooted in blood-and-soil arguments. Some of these policies explicitly exclude foreigners from regular taxpayer benefits and treatment, such as Shizuoka Prefecture's erstwhile guidelines for "Kokumin Kenkou Hoken", the national health service.

The clearest case of unnecessary segregation concerns the Residency Certificate (*juuminhyou*) and Family Registry (*koseki*) systems, where only citizens (i.e. those with a *koseki*) may be listed as "residents". What other developed country (including Germany, with a similar family registry system) requires citizenship for formal residency? The systems even [split international families apart](#), so that officially foreigners may not be listed together with their family members as "parent" or "spouse". I can think of few official policies more unwelcoming and alienating to immigrants on a basic level than this.

4) Policywise, Japan is, again, a) not collecting sufficient data on ethnicity (cf. last year's National Census), b) not allowing "Japaneseness" to be seen as a matter of legal status (as opposed to blood and culture), and c) not making much of an attempt to recognize or appraise Japan's current, or future, multiculturalism. Japan still officially promotes homogeneity as part of national identity, regardless of social exigency or even research on the nature of immigrant populations to the contrary. [4]

5) Portraying the outsider as social bane instead of boon at the highest levels of government and media is not helpful for Japanese society in general, not to mention for the vast majority of hardworking foreign taxpayers who support this aging society. Instead, Japan's law enforcement is [falsifying](#) statistical data and interpretation, [encouraging](#) public witch hunts of foreigners, using outright [racism](#) in crime research, even stretching or [breaking](#) their own laws to justify pursuit of the foreigner in our midst. This must stop.

The need for everyone to try harder

Here are a few suggestions that Japan could undertake to smooth the path for immigrants to come, stay, and become assimilated, peacefully contributing members of society:

1) Illiteracy saps the potential of people in every society, so institute free government-sponsored language classes (as seen in places like the US) to get immigrants up to speed on their reading, writing, and spoken Japanese. At the moment, second-language education for immigrants is generally undertaken by local NGOs. Of course, this assumes that immigrants will make the effort to become functional if not fluent in the local language. However, initial signs, such as popular city-sponsored language classes I have attended in Anjo, Aichi Prefecture, indicate that they will.

2) Extend compulsory education to all children, including foreign children, in accredited schools, and accredit more ethnic schools to give them a choice.

3) Take concrete measures to protect the human and civil rights of non-Japanese residents. This includes not only passing laws against racial discrimination at all levels of government, but also enacting additional statutes ensuring equal access to living quarters and public goods, empowering governmental or non-governmental agencies with policing and punitive powers (such as the ombudsman proposal currently stalemated in the Diet), and clarifying labor laws protecting workers and their families against discrimination by nationality.

4) As Governor Ishihara suggested, enact a clear immigration policy, with targets to bring in educated people from overseas and ensure them stable jobs and visa status. Many countries, including the US, have benefited from "brain drains", and Japanese society has plenty going for it to attract people of talent. On that note:

5) Eliminate the oft-cited "nationality clause" (*kokuseki joukou*) for all government employment, and let individual qualifications and civil service examination results overrule citizenship requirements. At the moment, this is left up to local governments to decide, where it often is used to bar *Zainichis* from leadership posts.

6) Take steps to resolve the grey legal status of the *Zainichis* and other Permanent Residents. This would include, in addition to the above proposals, legalizing dual nationality, reducing the arbitrariness of naturalization procedures, granting local suffrage to Permanent Residents, and conferring citizenship by birth.

7) Eliminate the separation of "resident" and "citizen" fostered by the vagaries of the "*koseki*" and "*juuminhyou*" registry systems.

8) Make public statements (this would not require much budgetary outlay) at the highest levels of government explaining why foreigners are in Japan, the good works they are doing, and their indispensable roles in Japan's past and future. Underline the fact that foreigners are community residents and taxpayers like anyone else. Too much ink has been spilled reporting the crimes a tiny minority commit, and making a hullabaloo about the potential threats to public order they have not caused. Time to balance things out.

Conclusion

For all the talk about Japan's ill-conceived immigration policies, Japan doesn't seem to be doing as badly as some societies. As of this writing, Japan has not had a single foreigner riot. Many non-Japanese are laying down roots as residents: getting by in Japanese, getting a decent (if insecure) wage, buying homes, intermarrying, and, on rare occasions, naturalizing and even entering politics. Japan also, fortunately, has not resorted to old bad habits of forced assimilation (such as the "*douka seisaku*" policy, "Japanizing" indigenous peoples by eliminating their language and ethnic awareness). It is also, with some glaring exceptions, relatively tolerant of the cultural expression of minorities.

Japan has, however, since 2000 switched its treatment of foreigners from benign neglect to scapegoating for social problems. Even if this is taking place in many other countries too, neither extreme is acceptable.

In short, Japan has trouble knowing what to do with foreigners once they get here, or trusting them to carry on by themselves. Unpredictability and unprecedentedness, which foreigners by their very presence embody, are too readily seen as a threat by many of Japan's conservatives. Moreover, policy prescriptions to deal with them often seem to forget that many foreigners are now immigrants, not to mention human beings with feelings, livelihoods, and rights. This must change.

Fortunately, Japan is a society remarkably open to outside ideas, and, given time and enough debate from fluent immigrants arguing their case, I believe that Japan can, and will, do a lot better. Japan is world-class at welcoming strangers with kindness in the short term. Japan's future now requires that the nation learn how to do this in the long term.

Arudou Debito wrote this article for *Japan Focus*. He is the [author](#) of "*JAPANESE ONLY: The Otaru Hot Springs Case and Racial Discrimination in Japan*" (*Akashi Shoten Inc.*, revised 2006)

Arudou Debito will be on a speaking tour in the United States between March 20 and April 4, 2006. Confirmed schedule as of this writing: March 23: University of Michigan, Center of Japanese Studies ([see program](#)). March 28: Columbia University, Faculty of Law. To arrange a talk at your institution, contact him directly at debito@debito.org

Notes:

[1] ILO website, Center for Immigration Studies website citing US Census Bureau

[2] AP, "Japan Marks Shift, as Deaths Outpace Births", December 23, 2005.

[3] Simon Jackson, Director of Ridgerunner Architectural Design and Development in Sapporo, developing ski-resort condominiums in Niseko, Hokkaido.

[4] John Lie, *Multiethnic Japan*, Harvard Belknap, 2001.

