



This Is the New Japan: Immigrants are Transforming a Once Insular Society

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By Christian Caryl and Kashiwagi Akiko

A few years ago, when Milton Minoru Takahashi first set out to improve conditions for Brazilian guest workers living in Nagoya, he thought he'd be telling Japanese about soccer, samba and Brazilian beaches. They were the sales hooks the Brazilian-Japanese Takahashi—who works for a nonprofit foundation that aids the 60,000 foreigners in Nagoya—thought could open locals' eyes to the beauties of Brazilian culture. But, he says, "the Japanese didn't want to hear about those things. They wanted to talk about noise and garbage"—problems allegedly caused by the Brazilian immigrants in their neighborhoods.

Takahashi now spends most of his time on more mundane tasks, trying to help his fellow Brazilians overcome the bewildering array of barriers to integration into Japanese society. But he still wonders why the Japanese government is largely indifferent to the problems facing foreigners. What would he like to see from Tokyo? "Action," says Takahashi. Something, anything, to acknowledge that there are immigrants in the country—and that they require recognition and support.

Takahashi's frustration underscores a critical disconnect in Japan—a split between what the country is becoming and what most Japanese want it to be. For mostly economic reasons, Japan must open itself to other ethnicities. Japan's population is not only aging rapidly, but starting to decline. By the year 2050, it is expected to fall from 128 million now to around 105 million. To keep the economy viable, experts say, the country must let in more immigrants—not just guest workers, but it must also allow more foreign-born workers and their families to become naturalized citizens. A government panel acknowledged that in a report this summer, while at the same time recommending that the foreign percentage of the total population not exceed 3 percent, roughly double what it is now.

Consciously or not, ordinary citizens and government bureaucrats still cling to the notion that Japanese society is a unique, homogeneous culture. There is a conspicuous lack of public debate about how this insular country should adjust to the reality that more immigrants are coming—and that those already here are changing Japan. "The government has no [comprehensive] immigration policy," says Tsurunen Marutei. Rather, the approach is piecemeal, with different agencies issuing often contradictory regulations. Tsurunen should know. He's a former Finn turned Japanese citizen and, with Renho, formerly of Taiwanese nationality, and Shinkun Haku, formerly of South Korean nationality, one of three naturalized members of the national Parliament, or Diet.



Diet Member Tsurunen Marutei

The overwhelming majority of the ex-foreigners who now hold Japanese citizenship are Chinese and Koreans—a total of approximately 15,000 applicants become citizens per year—but increasingly there are Chinese short-order cooks, Indian software programmers, Bangladeshi used-car dealers, Brazilian textile-factory workers, Sri Lankan department-store cashiers. The overwhelming majority of the approximately 400,000 ex-foreigners who now attain Japanese citizenship each year are Chinese and Koreans—but increasingly one can also meet people like Miki Kaoru (formerly Colin Restall, born in the United Kingdom). "Generally people don't expect someone who looks like me to be a citizen," says Miki, 33, who makes his living translating software into English. He was naturalized this spring.

The number of foreigners in Japan has more than doubled over the past 15 years—rising from 886,000 in 1990 to over 2 million today. That amounts to 1.57 percent of the overall population—still small even by Western European standards (not to mention the United States or Canada). But that figure tells only part of the story. The rise in the foreign population is taking place against the background of Japan's demographic decline; as the population ages, native-born Japanese constitute a diminishing share of the work force. Meanwhile the number of marriages between Japanese and non-Japanese has been rising sharply. So-called international marriages made up 5.5 percent of the total in 2004 (the last year for which data are available).

The numbers also reveal a growing trend toward what one might call "genuine immigration." For many decades, the bulk of foreigners in Japan were ethnic Koreans, the vast majority of them born in the country but not automatically entitled to citizenship. In recent years, as their members have either died out or increasingly opted for naturalization, their share of the total number of foreigners has been declining. Meanwhile, so-called permanent residents—foreign-born people who have chosen to live in Japan for the long term—are steadily growing. "It shows that immigrants, not multi-generational foreigners are now becoming the more common permanent residents in Japan, meaning they're not going to leave," says human-rights activist Arudou Debito, a former American turned Japanese citizen. "I used to say half of the foreigners in Japan were born here. Now it's more like a quarter."

And the fundamental consequence, says Arudou, is clear: "We're going to see people who don't look Japanese being Japanese. That's undeniable." Essentially, any foreigner who has lived in Japan for five years can prove he or she is in good financial health and has no criminal record can petition the Justice Ministry to become a citizen. In reality, the naturalization process is more complicated, and can take about 1 to 2 years to complete.

Japan's need for immigrants is now driven by hardheaded economic realities. Thanks to Japan's resurgent economy and shrinking population, many industries are suffering from labor shortages, and immigrants are already sustaining sectors where native-born Japanese simply aren't able or willing to pick up the slack. That's the case in towns like Hamamatsu, where the local car and motorcycle industries have been buoyed by an influx of foreign labor, and in Ota City, where a Subaru factory and

its parts suppliers are located.

Or take Homigaoka, a suburb of Toyota City, where ethnic Japanese from Brazil make up 5,000 of the 9,000 people living in a vast public-housing development. The Brazilians came to Japan thanks to a 15-year-old law designed to alleviate labor shortages in certain sectors of the economy. These days the Aichi prefecture firms that supply parts to Toyota and other local manufacturers are heavily dependent on the cheap labor provided by Brazilians (many of them now permanent residents who are entitled to stay in the country indefinitely). The magazine Weekly Diamond neatly summed up the situation in a headline recently: WITHOUT FOREIGNERS TOYOTA'S JUST-IN-TIME SYSTEM WOULDN'T WORK. Says Sakanaka Hidenori, a former director of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau: "This labor force is contributing to Japan's ability to make good and cheap cars."



The Homigaoka Latin American Center

The problem, though, is that these immigrants may not prove so cheap in the long run. Many of the immigrants in Homigaoka are part-time workers who lack the basic health insurance or social security usually enjoyed by full-time employees. A loophole in the law means that their employers can get away without making any contributions on their behalf since they are not full-time workers. Many of them have only limited Japanese-language skills. And there's no law that compels them to send their children to Japanese public schools, where they might have the chance to gain the know-how that would give them social mobility. Most foreign children attend schools, but their Japanese language skills tend to be weak, and the government has virtually no provisions for teaching Japanese as a foreign language to students entering the system. As a result, the dropout rate is high. Needless to say, the creation of large groups of unemployable young people is a recipe for social problems in the future.

Or take the burgeoning Indian community in Tokyo's Edogawa ward. In 1998 the government of then Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori passed a law designed to alleviate a catastrophic shortage of software engineers by easing visa restrictions for programmers from India. Jagmohan Chandrani, 52, who has been living in the area since 1978, says 243 Indians were registered in Edogawa in 2000. Today there are 1,014—a fourfold increase.



The Kumar family buys fish from their friendly fishmonger at the local supermarket.

In "Indiatown," as it's already being called, the classic immigrant dynamic is beginning to take hold. Newcomers who've established themselves offer support networks to the ones that follow—for example, by acting as guarantors when the new arrivals sign housing leases. The majority of the newcomers are writing code for financial firms in downtown Tokyo, a short subway ride across the river. They have confounded the stereotype of poor, unskilled foreigners held by many Japanese.

Yet members of the community are still desperately seeking a building to house a school for the burgeoning population of children. Tokyo isn't helping, even though the Indian government in New Delhi provides facilities to the Japanese community there. Technically the Indians can be sent home when their visas (or jobs) run out—although as the growth of the community demonstrates, some will almost certainly find ways to stay on, and bring their relatives with them.

Five years ago a group of communities with large foreign populations sent a set of urgent policy recommendations to the government. They're still waiting for an answer. And they're not the only ones who are worried. Japan's business leaders are at the forefront of calls for a comprehensive immigration policy. Japan's Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry has predicted that the present work force of 66 million people will decline by 10 million by the year 2030. Before he stepped down earlier this year, the chairman of the Japanese Business Federation, Okuda Hiroshi, made headlines by calling on the country to accept foreign workers "in all business categories."

Immigration proponents do perpetuate the occasional myth. One common misconception: that immigrants alone can counter the demographic decline. Economists say that just isn't so. Robert Alan Feldman, an economist at Morgan Stanley, points out that immigrant workers almost always have lower productivity than natives, meaning that vast numbers of foreigners have to be brought in to make up the gap. (The solution, he says, is to find ways to encourage greater productivity from underutilized members of the population, such as women and the elderly.)

Despite the vagaries of life in their new country, most of the foreigners in Japan are living better lives than they would have back home. That's certainly true of the Brazilians in Homigaoka. Twelve-year-old Arakawa Editon says that he loves living in Japan, even though he can express the thought only in broken Japanese since he dropped out of public school a few years back. "I don't want to go back to Brazil," he declares.

He might well get his wish, and manage to stay. But if he does, it's in Japan's own interest to respond to the challenge he poses—by making it easier for people who are born in the country as well as immigrants to apply for citizenship; by forcing employers to bear some of the costs for social insurance; by making education mandatory for the children of foreigners legally in the country, and by providing resources to ensure that foreign residents learn Japanese. None of those measures may have been all that critical in the Japan of the past. But they're the only way to the future.

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