

## **JAPAN'S IMMINENT INTERNATIONALIZATION: CAN JAPAN ASSIMILATE ITS IMMIGRANTS?<sup>1</sup>**

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***ABSTRACT:*** *Visible in statistics regarding Japan's labor market, with record numbers of registered foreigners, international marriages, and Permanent Residents, Japan's internationalization and multiculturalization is inevitable. Critiquing Japan's ability and political will to assimilate them properly, the author finds that Japan is not as ill-prepared as one might expect. Nevertheless, significant obstacles to immigration and assimilation remain legally, legislatively, and socially, which the government is only beginning to address. Japan must learn how to treat outsiders not only with the respect and recognition they deserve (as contributors to Japanese society), but also must cease depicting foreigners as a social bane. If not, Japanese citizens will also bear the brunt of unresolved discrimination by race and ethnicity in future.*

With last year's ethnic riots in France, The Economist (London) ran a thoughtful article in November 2005<sup>2</sup> about possible causes. It posed an important question: Why are some countries able to assimilate immigrants and their children more peacefully than others? It made a journalistic attempt to compare "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 a period of three months), topped two million in 2005 for the first time in postwar Japan. However, in a country of 127.7 million, this still amounts to 1.5% of the total population--middling 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.<sup>3</sup>

However, these figures will change, as Japan's population of registered foreigners continues to grow. I believe Japan's future as a multiethnic society is inevitable. As I argued in a 2004 Japan Times column<sup>4</sup>, 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.

### **"RESISTANCE IS FUTILE"**

Consider the record numbers of "newcomer" foreigners who are making themselves unremovable--by taking out Permanent Residency (PR). According to the Ministry of Justice, "General Permanent

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was published in online academic journal Japan Focus ([www.japanfocus.org](http://www.japanfocus.org)), as well as in online journals Znet and AsiaMedia News Daily in January 2006.

<sup>2</sup> "Minority Reports", The Economist, November 10, 2005, see [http://economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=5135956](http://economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=5135956)

<sup>3</sup> Source: ILO website, and Center for Immigration Studies website citing US Census Bureau.

<sup>4</sup> "Japan and the Immigration Issue", The Japan Times, September 14, 2004, available at [www.debito.org/japantimes091404.html](http://www.debito.org/japantimes091404.html)

Residents" (*ippan eijuusha*) swelled from 145,336 in 2000 to 349,804 in 2005<sup>5</sup>. Meanwhile, the number of "Special Permanent Residents" (*tokubetsu eijuusha*--the ethnic Korean and Chinese "Zainichi") actually *shrank* (due to death or naturalization) from 512,269 to 451,909. Thus the PR "Newcomers" may outnumber the "Oldcomers" in just a few years.

Things are changing most noticeably in the makeup of the non-Anglophone population (which readers of Japan's English media are often blind to). Now comprising more than 75% of the total registered foreign residents, this steady growth is no accident. In 1990, the Japanese government tried to stem the "hollowing out" of domestic industry by providing a special "trainee" visa for overseas workers from the Nikkei Diaspora. Consequently, the number of registered "returnee" Brazilians alone has leapt from negligible to more than 300,000 in 2005<sup>6</sup>, putting them in third place behind the "Zainichi" Koreans and Chinese. These South American laborers are 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 a "foreigner", which was (roughly) "somebody larking about teaching English and going home after a year or so". No longer. Now an unignorable part of the economy, foreigners are graduating from "temporary guest" status to immigrant.

This trend is probably irreversible. Let's assume the government takes steps to remove foreigners from Japan by, for example, cracking down on overstayers, curbing visa programs, making life more difficult for them through tough anti-terrorist laws<sup>7</sup> or increased racial profiling. Foreigners will still come, again attracted by Japan's economic opportunities, and Japanese companies (especially those in the "3K" industrial sectors which Japanese laborers avoid) will still want them. According to prominent economics magazine *Shuukan Diamondo* (June 5, 2004), ? Japan's 760,000 foreign workers, some working 22-hour days, are now powering? companies like Toyota, Suzuki, Sanyo, Honda, and Yamaha. During a 2004 crackdown? on Chinese due to fears of SARS, factories in ruralities like Shikoku simply closed down. Thus any drastic action involving domestic industries will incur an economic backlash.

Even under the worst-case scenario (i.e. mass deportations of foreigners for mere political convenience), "foreigners" and their influence in Japan will not simply disappear. There are huge numbers of multiethnic Japanese now (the number of which is unclear, as the Japanese Census Bureau does not survey for ethnicity). This is due to the record numbers of international marriages and international children, the number of naturalized citizens, even (to give an extreme example) Japan's role as safe haven for abducted Japanese children following international divorces<sup>8</sup>. Since Japan is not in the habit of deporting citizens, even if they have foreign roots and are wanted criminal suspects overseas (cf. former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori), this scenario is well-nigh unimaginable.

In fact, it seems the tide is turning--back towards a grudging acceptance of the inevitability of immigration. This is overdue. As far back as 2000, under the Obuchi Administration, "The Prime

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<sup>5</sup> [www.moj.go.jp/PRESS/060530-1/060530-1.html](http://www.moj.go.jp/PRESS/060530-1/060530-1.html)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> This is in fact already happening, see "Here Comes the Fear", *The Japan Times*, May 24, 2005, at [www.debito.org/japantimes052405.html](http://www.debito.org/japantimes052405.html)

<sup>8</sup> More information on child abductions and case studies at [www.crnjapan.org](http://www.crnjapan.org)

Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century" (as well as the United Nations)<sup>9</sup> 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. However, this policy trial balloon was soon deflated, through government-sponsored public scares about hooliganism (during the 2002 World Cup), anti-terrorism policy putsches, and assiduous reportage on any purported rises in foreign crime.<sup>10</sup> Cooler heads have since run some fanciful proposals up the flagpole, such as bringing in Filipina nurses or robotizing elderly health care<sup>11</sup>, but the writing appeared on the wall this year.

It's official: As of 2006, Japan's population is in decline. Japan's Ministry of Health announced<sup>12</sup> that, thanks to the declining birthrate, deaths in 2005 unprecedentedly outnumbered births by 10,000 souls. From 2006 the population is projected to dwindle, falling to 100.7 million by 2050. This means that the foreign influx, about 50,000 people per year, is buoying the numbers in the black, at least for this year.

The reaction from policy circles and pundits was significant. Even frequent commentator on immigration and foreign crime Tokyo Governor Ishihara, in a December 22, 2005 press conference<sup>13</sup>, 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 Japan needs foreigners, warts and all, how equipped is Japan to deal with a future of immigration?

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**"THE 'JAPANESE DREAM'":  
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 possibility (as Governor Ishihara worried about in his infamous 2000 "Sankokujin Speech") of unrest and rioting?

The November 10, 2005 Economist article, which opened this paper, 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?<sup>14</sup>

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**CONDUCTIVE TOWARDS ASSIMILATION**

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<sup>9</sup> [www.debito.org/A.html](http://www.debito.org/A.html)

<sup>10</sup> Links to all pertinent sources in this paragraph at [www.debito.org/foreigncrimeputsch.html](http://www.debito.org/foreigncrimeputsch.html)

<sup>11</sup> Seriously. See "Japan's Humanoid Robots--Better Than People", The Economist, December 20, 2005, at [http://economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=5323427](http://economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=5323427)

<sup>12</sup> Associated Press, "Japan Marks Shift, as Deaths Outpace Births", December 23, 2005

<sup>13</sup> Video record available on that date from [www.mxtv.co.jp/tochiji/index.html](http://www.mxtv.co.jp/tochiji/index.html) minute 11

<sup>14</sup> As this is meant to be a seminal paper, I will focus on Japan and leave the country-specific comparison for a doctoral candidate.

1) Foreigners can own property, which means they can buy homes and establish a business somewhere in Japan. However, without Permanent Residency (*eijuuken*, or PR), they face great difficulty getting loans from established organizations at competitive interest rates<sup>15</sup>. PR in itself is quite difficult to get, evidenced by the low number of recipients: under 100,000 people in 2000, or less than 6% of the total foreign population<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, institutionalized suspicion trickles down: Even minor financial institutions, such as credit card companies and cellphone operators (such as until recently NTT Docomo), often consider foreigners too risky or fly-by-night, denying them credit avenues or requiring deposits without looking at credit records or income.<sup>17</sup>

2) Foreigners can found and run their own businesses (as the ethnic restaurants, kitchen-sink importers, used-good exporters, and nightlife around Japan can attest). Naturally, there are some barriers to entry. Based upon your visa, you either face a local-hire requirement (if you try to sponsor your own visa with your business), or local-guarantor requirement, with heavy deposits for business loans. However, things have been loosening up, with things such as "1-yen companies", and open-secret loopholes (such as getting a visa separate from your business, and treating your business as a side-job)<sup>18</sup>.

More concretely, setting up a company in Japan is not all that difficult anymore. According to the World Bank's International Finance Corporation<sup>19</sup>, 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 bureaucratically unreasonable for the region (average: 52.6 days' wait, 8.2 procedures); at a stretch Japan is even less cumbersome than China (US\$175 start-up, 48 days' wait, 13 procedures). However, Japan is uncompetitive compared to the high-income OECD (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 upon 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...

3) Unemployment rates are nominally low in Japan and there is a labor shortage, meaning chances are there will be less indigency. If you come to Japan, you will probably find a job. That's not to say, however, that this employment is secure or lucrative. According to the National Union of General Workers, Tokyo Nambu, 90% or all foreigners in Japan are on fixed-term contract labor. Incomes for the most recent newcomers (such as the above-mentioned "trainees", often hired on half-wages with no social benefits) 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 *banlieues*, the scene of much unrest). However, there is little to no protection against housing discrimination, creating "gaijin apartments" and de facto "foreigner zones" in towns near factories.

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<sup>15</sup> *Steven Herman vs. Asahi Bank*, 1999-2002, see [www.debito.org/hermancase.html](http://www.debito.org/hermancase.html)

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth C. Wu, "Discrimination of Foreign Workers in Japan", *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 469, Autumn 2003.

<sup>17</sup> [www.debito.org/TheCommunity/communityissues.html#credit](http://www.debito.org/TheCommunity/communityissues.html#credit)

<sup>18</sup> Source: Simon Jackson, Director of Ridgerunner Architectural Design and Development in Sapporo, developing ski-resort condominiums in Niseko, Hokkaido

<sup>19</sup> [www.doingbusiness.org/ExploreTopics/StartingBusiness](http://www.doingbusiness.org/ExploreTopics/StartingBusiness)

5) There is some degree of social mobility for the multiethnic residents. There are politicians with international backgrounds, even if the foreign community has not yet become a recognizable voting bloc. There is plenty of historical precedent of foreigner success stories, prominent non-Japanese (even Zainichi in the entertainment world who are hiding their roots) in the media, and "foreign viewpoints" in Japan's manga culture creating bestsellers. Nevertheless, there are "foreigner quotas" in many arenas, such as sports. And of course:

6) It is very easy to marry a Japanese, as more than 40,000 international couples do so every year.<sup>20</sup> That's the strongest possible root for any non-Japanese resident, and it opens doors in terms of working visas and community standing.

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## UNCONDUCTIVE TOWARDS ASSIMILATION

1) Foreigners are not required to attend any primary schooling in Japan. This means the Brazilian community, for example, a) has had to set up its own schools, or b) is witnessing second-generation uneducated youth gangs (*cf.* the Herculano Murder Case) on a smaller scale of those in France. Consequently, the rate of functional illiteracy in Japanese amongst the "newcomer" (i.e. non-Zainichi) immigrants is probably quite high, if the government would actually bother to recognize the problem and provide data. The Japanese government, represented by Dietmember Kouno Taro, is currently proposing Japanese language education (as well as testing for visa qualification) in an attempt to address this situation, but details are still sketchy as of this writing.<sup>21</sup>

2) Foreigners are still barred from some job sectors, famously government-sponsored food preparation and firefighting. Glass ceilings and hazings in Japan's entry-level corporate culture are rife. Foreigners are still not permitted to sit civil-service examinations in certain regions, such as Tokyo.<sup>22</sup>

3) Foreigners are not entitled to the same job security, social security, or legal protections as Japanese.<sup>23</sup> Many of them 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.

4) Japan keeps its foreigners on separate and tight (moreover tightening) leash, and the Zainichis, for example, are denied the rights of citizens even after four generations here. The ones who assimilate, that is, naturalize, do so at great sacrifice of their ethnicity and distinctiveness. There is also a perception problem: Many official definitions of "community members deserving social benefits and protections" (under rubric such as "kokumin", or "nationals") are rooted in blood-and-soil arguments, at times surfacing (as in Shizuoka Prefecture guidelines for "Kokumin Kenkou Hoken" national health service) to explicitly exclude foreigners. Even legally (*cf.* the "juuminhyou" residential and

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<sup>20</sup> [www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/jinkou/suii05/marr2.html](http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/jinkou/suii05/marr2.html)

<sup>21</sup> My critique of Kouno Taro's proposal in *The Japan Times*, "A Way Forward? New immigration proposals are a step in the right direction", July 11, 2006, available at [www.debito.org/japantimes071106.html](http://www.debito.org/japantimes071106.html)

<sup>22</sup> *cf.* Health worker Zainichi Korean Chong Hyang Gyun lawsuit [www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?nn20050127a1.htm](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?nn20050127a1.htm)

<sup>23</sup> Links to extensive writings on these subjects at [www.debito.org/handout.html](http://www.debito.org/handout.html), particularly "Academic Apartheid" in Japan's education sector [www.debito.org/residentspage.html#ninksei](http://www.debito.org/residentspage.html#ninksei)

"koseki" family registry systems), there is a very visible and unnecessary segregation of society into resident and immigrant.

5) Policywise, Japan is not a) collecting sufficient data collection on ethnicity (*cf.* the most recent National Census), b) allowing "Japaneseness" to be seen as a matter of legal status (as opposed to blood and culture), or c) 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 to the contrary.<sup>24</sup>

6) Viewing the outsider as social bane instead of boon at the highest levels of government and media is simple not helpful, particularly for the vast majority of hardworking foreign taxpayers who support Japan's aging society. Instead, Japan's law enforcement is falsifying statistical interpretation<sup>25</sup>, encouraging public witch hunts of foreigners<sup>26</sup>, using outright racism in crime research<sup>27</sup>, even stretching or breaking their own laws<sup>28</sup> to justify their pursuit of the foreigner in our midst.

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### **MUST TRY HARDER, EVERYONE**

Here are a few suggestions that Japan could undertake if it is truly serious about allowing 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, one 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) Make elementary education compulsory for all children, including foreign children, in accredited schools (since recently Ministry of Education accreditation has been slowly deigning to include international schools)--or you will face generations of an uneducated underclass.

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 proposed ombudsman proposal currently stalemated in the Diet), and clarifying labor laws protecting workers and their families against discrimination by nationality.

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<sup>24</sup> *cf.* John Lie, Multiethnic Japan, Harvard Belknap.

<sup>25</sup> "Generating the Foreign Crime Wave", The Japan Times, October 24, 2002  
[www.debito.org/japantimes100402.html](http://www.debito.org/japantimes100402.html)

<sup>26</sup> "Downloadable Discrimination", The Japan Times, March 20, 2004  
[www.debito.org/japantimes033004.html](http://www.debito.org/japantimes033004.html)

<sup>27</sup> "Forensic Science Fiction", The Japan Times, January 13, 2004  
[www.debito.org/japantimes011304.html](http://www.debito.org/japantimes011304.html)

<sup>28</sup> "Checkpoint at Check-In", The Japan Times, October 18, 2005  
[www.debito.org/japantimes101805.html](http://www.debito.org/japantimes101805.html)

- 4) As Governor Ishihara suggested, enact a clear immigration policy to bring in educated people from overseas and ensure them stable jobs and visa status. Many countries, including the US, have benefited from the "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, with mixed results, especially when it is used to bar Japan-born-and-bred 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 granting 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) from the highest levels of government stating why foreigners are in Japan, the good works they are doing, and how they 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.

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## CONCLUSION:

In sum, 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 entering politics. Japan also, fortunately, has not resorted to old bad habits of forced assimilation (such as the *douka seisaku* policy to "Japanize" 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, like in many other countries, scapegoating them for many of its social troubles. 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 all 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 too with feelings, livelihoods, and rights. This will have to change.

Fortunately, Japan as a society is 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 quite easily. Japan is world-class at welcoming strangers with kindness in the short term. Japan will now have to learn how to do it in the long term.

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