Labor Migration to Japan: Comparative Perspectives on Demography and the Sense of Crisis

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This set of papers is adapted from the panel, "Labor Migration to Japan: Demography and the Sense of Crisis," held at the Association of Asian Studies meetings in March, 2007. As the chair and discussant of the panel, I would like to introduce these papers to the Japan Focus audience. If there ever was a notion that a straightforward relationship exists between population decline, on the one hand, and the welcoming of immigration in a transparent, systematic, and coordinated manner, on the other, these papers show it to be totally mistaken. Even in the face of anxieties concerning labor shortages, the politics of migration in receiving countries prove to be complex indeed, as the state seeks to perfectly regulate and control immigration, and to define those worthy of some kind of regular status, versus those unworthy, illegal, and thereby, criminal. While migrants' 1.6% share of the population may sound insignificant in comparison with levels in Europe, the government has mentioned raising the level to three percent, so there is now an official discourse toward increasing foreign residents' presence. At three percent, Japan would approach Spain's ratio (3.1%) in 2002 [1]

Yoshie Nakashima, left, who immigrated to Japan from Vietnam in 1982,
with her daughter, Ai, and son, Jun, in the family's house.
They adapted Japanese names.

Does the impending population decline inevitably mean Japan's doors to migration will open in warm embrace? Do the government ministries coordinate and agree on how immigration policy should proceed in an era when the working population is shrinking? Will

the current loopholes for unskilled workers shut and make way for a system that acknowledges the need for long-term unskilled labor from abroad? Gabriele Vogt's paper showcases an agreement between Japan and the Philippines to explore these questions, highlighting some of the differences in views among ministries as well as pointing to the latest stance of Keidanren toward expanding the system of economic partnership agreements. Vogt finds no mandate for replacement migration in Japan, but rather, a contested path ahead, as ministries and economic organizations struggle to agree on what level of migration will be acceptable. I reached a similar conclusion when writing on this topic (Roberts, forthcoming).[2]

Deborah Milly's paper spans her research on other countries in demographic decline—Italy, Spain, and Korea—to illuminate the pitfalls in migration policy construction. She deftly demonstrates that governments' very efforts to prosecute and crack down on illegal migrants causes them to become unauthorized. Asylum seekers become vulnerable, employment permit systems end in workers' entrapment in abusive situations, and laws and procedures that look very tidy on paper are actually impossible to enforce, or are inconsistently enforced. As she observes, advocacy groups' role as watchdogs in upholding the human rights of asylum seekers and migrants is crucial. Milly suggests that concerted, sustained effort on the part of officials,

advocacy groups and employers will be necessary to achieve an immigration system that does not create incentives for migrants to become undocumented even though it sets out to control such a trend.

The sense of crisis over immigration stems not only from the projections of a much smaller population in Japan, possibly leading to economic malaise, labor shortages, and pension and healthcare budgetary problems, but also from the question of public safety and security in an age in which the percentage of foreign nationals and their diversity is increasing. Ryoko Yamamoto's paper offers an insightful view into the discourse of criminality that hounds migrants in Japan, and the efforts of Japanese advocacy groups in challenging this discourse. How effective are advocacy groups in changing majority opinion that associates migrants with criminal behavior? Yamamoto's informant's analogy of migration politics to an Othello gameboard offers a fascinating glimpse at how minorities can wield some influence.

Atsuko Abe utilizes questionnaire data to query the relationship between local governments and the foreign nationals in their midst. Are foreign residents perceived as a kind of 'citizen'? Do local governments use multi-lingual services to reach out to foreign residents? As Abe herself notes, foreign residents are a diverse group, in terms of origin as well as occupation, length of residency, knowledge of Japanese language and

social institutions, and connections to the Japanese community. Her research finds that local governments, especially those with larger foreign-resident populations, do respond with programs to try to support them in their lives in Japan, and that some local governments bypass the prefectural level altogether to work with migrants. 'Multicultural co-existence,' however, seems to be very much a question, with little consensus over how far foreign residents should be required to assimilate. Abe relates that Multi-cultural Co-existence has become an official policy, but how do people view 'multiculturalism' on the ground? This will be an important issue to follow in the coming years. The issues raised in these papers will continue to be salient as Japan comes to term with the realities of population decline and the presence of diverse migrants.

[1] OECD (2003): *Stocks of foreign and foreign-born populations in selected OECD countries*, *1995 and 2002*. http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/7/49/24994376.pdf (found 1 December 2006).

[2] Roberts, Glenda S. Forthcoming. "Fewer Japanese, More Immigrants? Migration Frameworks and Policy Challenges", in Coulmas, Florian; Conrad, Harald; Schad-Seifert, Annette; Vogt, Gabriele (eds.)*The Demographic Challenge. A Handbook about Japan*Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.

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