

Transnational Migration in East Asia: Japan in Comparative Focus

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This special two-day conference on migration, held May 31–June 1, 2007, at Japan's National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) in Osaka, was one of the first and most comprehensive meetings of scholars on the full dimensions and implications of migration both to and from Japan. It was also a valuable opportunity to reconsider international migration from an East Asian vantage point – and especially convenient for non-Japanese since the papers were written in English.¹

MIGRANTS IN JAPAN

Japan is now very much a country of migration, with sizeable numbers of people moving both outward and inward across its borders. The number of foreigners residing in Japan exceeds two million and includes a very wide range in type of migration (labor, refuge, education, marriage) and country of origin. Conference papers provided especially detailed discussion of six groups: Koreans, including the quite distinctive experience of Jeju Islanders and ethnic Koreans from China; “oldcomer” and “newcomer” Chinese; Brazilians, with attention to their experience in Japan and the effects on sending communities in Brazil; Filipinos, ranging from early, widely respected boxers and musicians to more recent, generally disesteemed entertainers and healthcare workers; Vietnamese, who now include early official refugees and more recent students, workers, and international spouses; and Nepalis, including their complex migration routes throughout East Asia.

¹For notification of publication details and date of availability, send an email with the heading “Minpaku Proceedings” to AsianMigration@comcast.net or dhaines1@gmu.edu.

These conference papers suggest that Japan now has a very complex set of migrants, with considerable variation among both recent and long-term arrivals. While the volume of immigration in North America and Europe remains far greater than in Japan, this complex Japanese landscape of migrant origins suggests a rich potential for comparative analysis. The Vietnamese may serve as one example. Japan accepted about 11,000 Vietnamese refugees beginning in the late 1970s, but the logic of their lives in Japan varies from what is found in North America. In particular, residence in Japan is often not a final step in the migration experience, but rather an interim step during which further options can be explored. In addition, the educational system in Japan has tended to keep the Vietnamese from pursuing the upward mobility through schooling that has been a hallmark of their experience in North America. As another example, Koreans in Japan are a mix of North (*Kitachosen*) and South (*Kankoku*) Korean sympathizers, but those sympathies do not necessarily match geographical origins. Many early Korean migrants, for example, came from Korea's southern island of Jeju, yet their sympathies lie with the North. This is a vital reminder that national and ethnic labels applied to migrants often obscure as much as they reveal.

The adjustment of these migrants to Japan is not always an easy one. Papers and discussion suggested that many of the problems are similar to those faced in other countries. Migrants are often trapped in relatively low-wage jobs and poor quality housing, and face numerous difficulties in obtaining services and medical care. In other cases, however, the problems that migrants face are rather different. In legal terms, for example, migrants' children often remain "foreigners" even if born in Japan. Somewhat paradoxically, Japan requires greater cultural assimilation of newcomers but provides fewer practical opportunities to achieve that assimilation. Perhaps the most difficult area involves education. Migrants are not required to attend school and often do not do so. When they do, they are often marginalized. Furthermore, there seem to be fewer chances for adult education, which is absolutely crucial for most migrants. Despite such problems, paper presenters and conference discussion suggested some hope that Japanese society is responding to migrants with increased openness, particularly in those geographical areas in which the numbers of migrants are highest.

MIGRATION AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Migration has become a major social issue in contemporary Japan. Attempts to manage low-wage labor migration have become frayed, whether in the

admitted failings of the labor trainee program or the reduction in entertainer visas in response to international concerns that women from the Philippines were being trafficked into the Japanese sex industry. The result has been considerable public concern about effective governance but also concern about the way such immigration controls often hurt migrants both economically and socially – for example, increasing the stigma attaching to the many Filipina migrants who are not involved in the sex industry.

Migration in Japan also relates to two broader issues of social planning. One is multiculturalism. Can Japan become a country in which multiple cultural codes and multiple languages are accepted? Migrants are testing the willingness of Japanese society and Japanese government to move toward such a multicultural society. Paper presenters highlighted this tension in the areas of language, education, and religion. In each of these areas, the resistance to diversity is strong, yet many Japanese have come to accept the basic logic of international schools, marriage to foreigners, and living amicably at the local level. This gives hope that Japan may develop a hybrid solution in which multiculturalism is not the overall framework for the society, but nevertheless exists as an accepted alternative to a more traditionally defined, homogeneous Japanese identity. The Japanese case thus stands between North America, with a framework of blended multiculturalism (at least in theory), and places like Singapore and Malaysia, where multiple groups (and legal systems) exist side by side but with distinct boundaries.

Migration in Japan is also closely related to population change. Although increasing slightly in 2006, Japan still has one of the world's lowest fertility rates. The country is now in overall population decline, and straight-line projections suggest the over-65 proportion of the population will increase to about 30 percent by 2025. Migration is important to this trend in various ways. For example, there continues to be discussion of migration as a way to stabilize population and workforce size. The inflow of migrants could have some effect on these overall numbers, especially if arriving migrants are young, form families, and have relatively large numbers of children – thus requiring exactly the kind of social acceptance and educational opportunities that are currently lacking. It is unlikely, however, that migration can have a major effect on these population trends. The required numbers are simply too great.

However, migration is also important in terms of population change for other reasons. Some retired Japanese, for example, are now moving to other countries. Conversely, some immigrants to Japan are involved in care work for the elderly. The aging of the society may thus not change overall net migration, but still create a new and complex reciprocal migration involving the elderly.

While some of that migration may involve Australia, Canada, and the United States (Hawaii in particular), the major interaction is likely to be with Southeast Asia, as Japanese move to such countries as Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia (especially Bali), and the Philippines, and as care workers come from those countries to Japan.

LESSONS FROM JAPAN

This consideration of Japanese migration is important partly in adding new case material to the existing academic record. It is helpful, for example, to see how the decisions of Nepalis about migration destinations reflect the complicated colonial history of Asia – with many Nepalis finding a ready place in formerly British Hong Kong and those without direct British colonial connections seeking to enter Japan. It is particularly helpful to see that colonial legacy in tandem with Japanese colonialism. Much migration to Japan – especially of Koreans and Chinese – reflects prior Japanese colonialism as much as contemporary economic relations. Even the notion of multiculturalism is tinged with the memories of the forced structuring of diversity during the empire.

In a final session at the conference, a series of papers looked at the Japanese experience with migration from this more comparative perspective. One presenter, for example, outlined the basic features of labor migration, paths to citizenship, and new mixed migrant generations in Korea. The increasing number of international marriages in Korea is yielding a set of children – often labeled as “Kosians” – who challenge many aspects of Korean society. Here lies an intriguing case of a hybrid ethnogenesis. Another paper provided a comparison of labor migration policies in Japan, Korea, and Singapore, noting especially the degree of control over migration, the frequent subcontracting of that control, and the extent to which migration is the result of the forceful transplantation – rather than free movement – of labor. The emerging role of governmental and nongovernmental entities in several East Asian countries also received attention. The nature of both governmental and civil sectors is rather different in East Asia, and the Japanese case suggests both the ways new NGOs develop and how local governments are frequently the leading force in developing new programs for migrants. Finally, a paper reviewing the European experience with migration noted the ways Japan’s experience both resembles it in some areas (especially in the difficulties of managing labor migration) but also frequently differs (especially in the official attitudes about cultural diversity).

It is useful to have this Japanese experience “on the record” as a complement to a field of migration studies that tends to be dominated by research on Europe and North America. Many of the lessons from the conference have to do with expanding the record, noting different kinds of economic relations, labor management programs, schooling options, diversity within migrant groups, cultural assumptions about diversity, and historical bases of particular migrant streams. However, some of the lessons coming from this Japanese experience, and from the analysis of Japanese anthropologists of this experience, go beyond simply expanding the field of knowledge to raising crucial questions about the nature of our understanding of migration. As one example, it became clear during the conference that migration often involves a series of incremental shifts in migration options that lead to geographical moves of indefinite duration. Those movements, in turn, become the basis for additional decisions about possible future moves – also of indefinite duration. The implication is that migration is not a rending of the social fabric, but an iterative and cumulative reweaving of that fabric. To move is human, and to move again is perhaps even more so. Migration thus emerges as an open-ended process, rather than one that necessarily leads to closure. As another example, the relative volume of different kinds of migration often shifts the basic logic of analysis. For example, in Japan, international marriage is a major component of immigration – more than one in twenty marriages now involves a foreign spouse (about six percent), and the percentages are much higher in Tokyo (about ten percent) and higher yet in some rural areas. Thus, much of Japanese immigration is not about multiculturalism among groups, but rather multiculturalism within families and households. American maxims about “melting pot” and “salad bowl” make far less sense in understanding such intrahousehold dynamics – a sort of total immersion mutual accommodation.

Overall, the Japanese case suggests the need to simultaneously consider both in-migration and out-migration, and to consider both short- and long-term versions of both. Contemporary Japan is, then, not so much either an immigration country or an emigration country as simply a migration country. This kind of balanced migration – as often a migration of choice as a migration of necessity – may ultimately represent a better model of migration for the 21st century than the massive net migration shifts seen in recent years, especially to North America. In the coming years, we might hope, the massive global disparities in wealth and human rights that produce such net migration shifts may yield to greater global equality. That, in turn, may produce migration that is more fully choice-driven, with more varied and open-ended decisions about where to move, for what reasons, and for what length of time.