

Demographic Challenges for the 21st Century: Population Ageing and the Immigration “Problem” in Japan¹

Ayumi Takenaka
Bryn Mawr College
Tohoku University

Although Japan may have lost the economic might and awe of the 1980s, there is one area in which it still has a lead: population ageing. Today, Japan is ageing faster than any other nation, with the world’s highest proportion of adults over 65 (23%), followed by Italy and Germany (20.4%), and one of the lowest ratios of children under 15 (13%). Its population is declining on a scale unprecedented in the developed world (at least in peacetime) and may further shrink by 32% to 86 million by 2060 from the current 128 million (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2012; Nihon Keizai Shinbun October 27, 2011). By 2060, the ratio of over-65s is expected to reach 40% (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2012). In 2001, the United Nations warned that to sustain the size of the working-age population at the 1995 level of 87.2 million, Japan would need 33.5 million immigrants from 1995 through 2050 (UN 2001). By this estimate, the immigrants and their descendants would comprise 17.7 per cent of the country’s total population by 2050 (UN 2001).

This poses a dilemma, particularly for Japan. Japan regards itself as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous country and has accepted only a limited number of foreigners in the past decades. Even though the volume of migration has recently grown, the proportion of foreigners, presently at 1.5%, or just over 2 million (Ministry of Justice 2012), is very small in comparison with that in other industrial countries--8.2% in Germany, 7.1% in the U.K. and 7.1% in Italy (2009 statistics on the proportion of foreign, not foreign-born, population, quoted in OECD 2011). The official statistic of Japan’s foreign population even includes 400,000 multi-generational Korean residents who typically are not considered foreign elsewhere; even though they were born and raised in Japan, they nonetheless remain foreign due to Japan’s *jus-sanguinis* (blood-based), rather than *jus-soli* (based on place of birth), citizenship policy. How does Japan deal with this demographic dilemma?

Is immigration a viable solution to population ageing in Japan? How will population ageing shape the future of immigration policies, and how will immigration dynamics, in turn, affect demographic projections? As a forerunner in population ageing, and one of the most “reluctant” countries of immigration, Japan and the choices it makes are likely to offer lessons for the rest of the ageing world in tackling similar demographic challenges.

IMMIGRATION DEBATE IN THE CONTEXT OF POPULATION AGEING

In the context of accelerating ageing and continuous population decline, immigration has recently re-surfaced in public discussions (Repeta and Roberts 2010). Keidanren, Japan’s powerful business association, has actively advocated for accepting more skilled foreign workers; through publications, such as “Policy Suggestions for Accepting Global Talent” (2010), “How to Deal with the Economy and Society Faced with Population Decline” (2008), and “Toward a Vibrant and Attractive Japan” (2003),² it has argued that in the context of population ageing and decline, it is critical to attract foreign talent to revitalize Japan’s economy and society. So, too have other organizations and think tanks, including the Japan Economic Research Institute (2008), Council on Population Education and Akashi Research Group (2010), and the Japan Immigration Policy Institute (Sakanaka 2012, 2011, 2010). Faced with pressing demographic concerns, the Japanese government has also recognized the need to accept more skilled foreign workers. In 2008, it created the Council on Accepting Highly Qualified Foreigners in the Prime Minister’s Office, and the publication, “On the New Growth Strategy: Blueprint for Revitalizing Japan,” issued by the Cabinet (2010), explicitly states that accepting foreign talent is key to the country’s economic growth and revitalization. These views, though far from unanimous,

have led to a series of policy decisions to encourage foreign inflows, including tourists, at least to some extent. While maintaining to accept only skilled migrants in line with the existing policy, the Japanese government affirmed its stance to entice, and retain, more skilled migrants, along with foreign students and tourists, who would contribute to Japanese society and economy. According to the Ministry of Justice (2010), a ministry in charge of immigration policy, "Amid the serious decline in the population... (w) e will proactively accept foreign nationals who possess specialized knowledge, technology or skills ... in order to create new vitality of the Japanese economy and society ... and to strengthen its international competitiveness" (P. 21). The plan, it states, aims to create "a vibrant, prosperous society," "a safe and secure society" and "a harmonious society coexisting with foreign nationals" (P. 2). Foreign inflows should be encouraged, therefore, not strictly for demographic reasons (i.e., to make up for the country's ageing and declining population), according to the government, but only in the framework of social and economic development—to revitalize the rapidly ageing society and its economic vitality (Ministry of Justice 2010). To entice more "favorable" migrants and encourage them to stay in the country, Japanese immigration policy has become more selective, facilitating the entry of the skilled, while restricting that of others. Part of the scheme is a skill-based "points-system," to be introduced later this year. Similar to one adopted in many other developed countries, the points-system will allocate points to "preferred" individuals with an advanced degree, more work experience and higher income, particularly in the fields of business management, science and technology, and academic research; a degree from a Japanese educational institution adds 5 "bonus" points and Japanese language proficiency, 10 more points, out of a total of 100 points (Ministry of Justice 2011). Once they have entered, those "highly-qualified" migrants will be able to obtain permanent residency more easily than before (after 5 years of residence, instead of 10 years). Financially dependent parents and household employees will be allowed to come along, while spouses will be permitted to work for the first time (Ministry of Justice 2011).

The expanding skilled migration scheme also includes a foreign care worker program. Introduced in 1998 under the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with Indonesia and the Philippines, the program aims to provide opportunities for Indonesian and Filipino workers with specialized knowledge in eldercare and nursing, fields afflicted by perpetual labor shortages in an aging Japan. The program is not meant to fill labor shortages; it is fundamentally a "trainee" program that attempts to promote bilateral economic cooperation and integration with these countries (Ministry of Health, Labor and

Welfare 2011). Under this program, 793 Indonesians and 438 Filipinos have entered Japan on 3 to 4-year contracts. At the end of their contracts, trainees must pass Japan's notoriously difficult national nursing examination to stay in the country. Between 2009 and 2011, only 19 (out of 817 exam takers) passed the exam. The rest returned to their countries upon termination of their contracts (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2011). The dismal result, largely attributed to linguistic barriers, invited nation-wide criticisms (Yomiuri Shinbun January 29, 2012) and resulted in revising the exam, making it easier for foreign test takers by using fewer technical terminologies and Chinese characters. Subsequently, the number of successful foreign exam takers "jumped up" to 47, or 11.3% out of 415 exam takers, in the most recent test, according to Asahi Shinbun, a major daily, reported on March 27, 2012. To encourage more skilled migration in eldercare and nursing, the government is currently negotiating a similar treaty with Vietnam, India, and Thailand.

At the same time, various programs have been implemented in an attempt to increase the number of foreign students. The "300,000 Foreign Student Plan," for instance, intends to increase the number from the current 138,000 (in 2011) to 300,000 by 2020. Other programs, such as "the Asia Gateway Initiative" (Prime Minister's Office), "Global 30" (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture), and "Career Development Program for (Asian) Foreign Students in Japan" (Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry), aim to lure foreign students (and scholars) and retain them upon graduation by recruiting students abroad, providing financial support and career opportunities, and increasing the number of English-medium courses.

Similarly, the government plans to increase the number of foreign visitors to 25 million by 2020 under the "Basic Plan for the Promotion of Tourism" (2007). To this aim, the Japan Tourism Agency was established in 2008 within the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism, with a broad objective of "building a country good to live in, good to visit" and "achieving a true tourism nation" (Japan Tourism Agency 2012).

All these measures were officially implemented as part of national growth strategies under the grand scheme of the "New Growth Strategy (Basic Policy)" (2009). Thus, bringing in more foreigners, once again, is not meant to serve as "replacement migration" (UN 2001) to make up for the country's ageing and declining population. Even though the current public discussion on immigration, fueled in the context of accelerating population ageing and decline, is inexorably linked to demographic

problems, immigration is treated only as a means to revitalize its ageing society and increase the country's economic competitiveness in an increasingly globalized world.

ACTUAL OUTCOMES

The outcomes of these measures, however, are quite different from their intentions. Highly skilled migrants, at least the kinds of migrants the government intends to attract, are not coming to Japan in significant numbers. In fact, the number of newly admitted skilled migrants declined from over 120,000 in 2005 to less than 60,000 in 2009 (Ministry of Justice 2011). Moreover, a good portion of these "skilled" migrants are so-called "entertainers," many of whom work in bars as hostesses. Nor are many skilled migrants staying in Japan very long. In particular, the highly talented with extraordinary abilities and globally compatible skills are less likely to stay and tend to see Japan as a stepping-stone to move on elsewhere, according to interviews I conducted with foreign migrants and students in Japan between 2008 and 2010.³ A Korean student, who studied physics at a prestigious Japanese university with a fully-funded Japanese government scholarship, told me during an interview that he intended to pursue his Ph.D. in the U.S. "I want to challenge myself at a higher level," he said in fluent English, mixing up with some Japanese words; "If I stay here for so long and get too used to the Japanese way of doing science, I feel I won't be able to compete globally." He regarded the Japanese academic environment rather parochial and not quite globalized. Whether he actually leaves for the U.S. after completing his master's course is unclear. This tendency was clearly observed among foreign students interviewed, particularly in science and engineering (See also Murakami 2009). Similarly, tourists are not coming in large numbers, either. Currently, Japan is ranked 30th among major countries in attracting foreign tourists (6.2 million in 2011) (Japan National Tourism Organization 2012).

As for foreign students, the overall number coming has steadily increased each year, reaching a "record high" of 141,000 in 2010 (In 2011, it dropped to 138,000, according to JASSO 2012). Yet, so, too, has the number leaving Japan. In 2010, about 40% left Japan upon completing their studies (JASSO 2012). Moreover, over one fifth of all foreign students were non-degree seeking students, such as exchange students and short-term language learners. In addition, more than half (or 51%) of foreign students are undergraduates, rather than graduate students (27%) and enroll in the humanities and social sciences (over 80%) instead of science and engineering (19%) (JASSO 2011). Doctoral students are less likely to stay in Japan (48%) than

masters (63%) and undergraduate students (70%) (JASSO 2011). And those enrolled in English-medium "global courses" (particularly in science and engineering) tend to leave, using the education and resources they acquired in Japan as a stepping-stone to move on to other countries, such as the U.S. (according to interviews I conducted). Ironically, Japan appears to lose many ambitious and talented students by offering English-medium courses in an attempt to globalize itself.

All in all, Japan has not been quite successful in attracting, and retaining, the kinds of foreigners it intends to attract (Tsukazaki 2008). Foreigners who come and stay in Japan in large numbers are not "highly qualified individuals" as targeted by the government, but rather low-skilled workers who enter through familial and ethnic ties. In 2009, only 17% of foreign workers engaged in professional and skilled jobs (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare 2010). Whether this trend will be overturned by the new points-system and other "proactive" policies trumpeted by the government is yet to be seen.

LESSONS FOR OTHER COUNTRIES?

In the midst of growing public discussion over immigration fueled by population ageing and decline, Japan has nevertheless succeeded in increasing temporary and cyclical migration. That is, the volume of entry has grown through "revolving-door" migration. Foreign nurses and caregivers began to come, but the majority go home after a couple of years. Foreign students, particularly those with advanced degrees in science and engineering, are also not likely to stay for long. This may reflect the intent of some policy makers, as one put it during an interview: "Japan should accept immigration only on a temporary and rotating basis to keep the nation culturally homogeneous and socially stable. ... In the end, Japanese people are concerned about crime and disorder associated with growing inflows of foreigners." As another policy maker interviewed implied, skilled migrants may be encouraged, perhaps because they are unlikely to come or stay in Japan for long. The series of policies being implemented, thus, may be merely rhetorical.

Regardless of its intent, Japan is clearly faced with a number of contradictions. If the government truly intends to achieve their stated goals, there is a significant gap between intentions and actual outcomes. As indicated earlier, not so many skilled migrants are coming or staying, as intended by the government. At the same time, unskilled migration, which the government tries to regulate, has grown more. This contradictory outcome fuels public anxiety that there ought to be stricter control

over immigration, particularly for unskilled foreign workers. And this, in turn, reinforces the image outside the country that Japan is a closed society, unwelcoming foreigners. The international media often portray Japan battling its demographic crisis by refusing to let in immigrants; the country is also viewed as doomed in the face of demographic crisis – or to be revived by boosting new industries. In a Washington Post article, “Demographic Crisis, Robotic Cure? Rejecting Immigration, Japan Turns to Technology as Workforce Shrinks,” Harden (2008) discusses how Japan embraces robots for its demographic crisis. The New York Times reports, “Despite need Japan keeps high wall for foreign labor” (Tabuchi 2011), and Japan may indeed “pick robots over immigrants” (BBC May 17, 2011). This widespread image may have contributed to keeping the immigration volume low by discouraging highly skilled migrants to come and stay in the country. And this, in part, resulted in pressing the government to adopt a more open immigration policy (at least in appearance), according to an interview conducted with a policy expert. In reality, Japan maintains a fairly open policy toward skilled migrants (admitting skilled foreign workers without setting numerical quotas, unlike the U.S., for instance); the result, however, is that despite this, many of them, once again, are not coming or staying for long.

If, on the other hand, the government truly prefers to avoid immigration, it still faces a contradiction between what they say and what they want. In this scenario, the policy has served them well; it has helped to limit the overall stock of immigration, while maintaining an “open” immigration policy on the surface. By adopting an “open” immigration policy, moreover, Japan can counter the image oft portrayed in the foreign media that it is a closed country. In fact, the Japanese mainstream media tend to focus on the “growth” of foreign-resident population, describing hopes, problems, and challenges associated with growing “multiculturalism” within the country. Between 2009 and 2010, Asahi Shinbun ran a series of articles about growing Chinese migrants in Japan, and in an article, “Opening Up the Country (Semarareru Aratana Kaikoku)” (January 9, 2010), it reported how the society has grown multicultural. Yomiuri Shinbun, another daily, published a report, “Becoming International Through Multicultural Exchange” (Tabunka Koryu de Kokusaijin ni) (May 8, 2008) by focusing on a school with a growing number of foreign students, and Nihon Keizai Shinbun, a business daily, recently quoted an expert in calling for greater awareness and acceptance of cultural differences (“Toward a Multicultural Society” (Kizukou Tabunka Kyosei Shakai), February 18, 2012). The tendency to focus on “multiculturalism,” reflected also in the growing volume of scholarly work (e.g., Kondo 2011; Satake 2011) and government initiatives on the subject (e.g., Ministry of

International Affairs and Communications 2006; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Organization for Migration 2012), further reinforces the contradiction described earlier, by concealing the reality – the reality that immigrants, in fact, are not coming or staying in significant numbers.

Whether Japan truly intends to accept more (skilled) foreign migrants or not, the country does have a limited volume of foreign migration, mostly temporary, cyclical, and unskilled. It is remarkable that Japan has managed to maintain a low level of immigration amid continuous calls for (skilled) immigration and rapidly ageing population. It is equally remarkable that the country has dealt with its ageing crisis and sustained itself socially and economically, thus far, with only limited immigration.

The way Japan has handled the demographic challenge may not offer lessons for other countries on how to incorporate immigrants to cope with population ageing. It may also not provide an answer as to how immigration may help alleviate population ageing. It may nevertheless offer a lesson on how to manage, and regulate, immigration amid rapid populating ageing or how to cope with population ageing without resorting to large-scale immigration.

Japan has dealt with its demographic problems by increasing “revolving door” migration. Whether this helps, or will help, reinvigorate an aging Japan remains to be seen. Equally uncertain is how long Japan can continue to sustain itself, both demographically and economically, unless the country opened up, genuinely, toward more immigrants – not simply in terms of the sheer number it allows to let in, but in welcoming them as part of their society.

NOTES

¹ This paper is based on the author’s presentation delivered at the 16th International Metropolis Conference in November, 2011 in Ponta Delgada, Azores, Portugal. I am grateful to the audience at the Conference and Robert Dujarric for helpful comments.

² All my translations. Whenever official translation is not available, I provide my own throughout this paper. Acknowledgement:

³ During the period, I conducted interviews with over 50 foreign residents of various nationalities in the Tokyo area and a dozen policy makers and public commentators. I also interviewed 45 foreign students (with Kumiko Tsuchida) enrolled in a Japanese university.

REFERENCES CITED

- BBC
2011 "Japan may pick robots over immigrants" (May 17, 2011) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8687196.stm> Accessed Nov. 1, 2011
- Council on Population Education and Akashi Research Group
2010 "Seven Proposals for Japan to Reestablish Its Place As a Respected Member of the International Community: Taking a Global Perspective on Japan's Future." Tokyo.
- Harden, Blaine
2008 "Demographic Crisis, Robotic Cure? Rejecting Immigration, Japan Turns to Technology as Workforce Shrinks," *Washington Post* (January 7, 2008)
- Japan National Tourism Organization
2012 http://www.jnto.go.jp/jpn/tourism_data/data_info_listing.html Accessed on March 16, 2012
- Japan Economic Research Institute
2008 "Gaikokujin Rodosha Ukeire Seisaku no Kadai to Hoko" (Problems and Direction of Acceptance of Foreign Migrant Workers). Tokyo.
- Japan Tourism Agency
2012 <http://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/en/> Accessed on March 15, 2012
- JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization)
2012 Statistics on Foreign Students in Japan. <http://www.jasso.go.jp/> Accessed on March 15, 2012
- JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization)
2011 "International Students in Japan 2010" <http://www.jasso.go.jp/>
- JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization)
2010 "International Students in Japan 2009" <http://www.jasso.go.jp/>
- Keidanren (Japan Business Association)
2010. "Global Jinzai no Ikusei ni muketa Teigen" (Policy Suggestions for Accepting Global Talent). Tokyo: Keidanren.
- Keidanren (Japan Business Association)
2008 "Jinko Gensho ni Taio shita Keizai Shakai no Arikata" (How to deal with the economy and society in the context of population decline). Tokyo: Keidanren.
- Keidanren (Japan Business Association)
2003 "Katsuryoku to Miryoku Afureru Nihon wo" (Mezashite Toward a Vibrant and Attractive Japan). Tokyo: Keidanren.
- Kondo, Atsushi
2011 Tabunka Kyosei Seisaku no Apuroch (Approach toward Multicultural Policy). Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2012 "International Workshop on Acceptance of Foreign Nationals and Their Integration Into Japan" (Jointly organized by the International Organization for Migration) http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/event/iom_workshop_1203.html, Accessed on April 10, 2012
- Ministry of Justice
2012 Statistics on Foreigners Registered in Japan. <http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/> Accessed on March 15, 2012
- Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare
2011 <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/> Accessed on October 31, 2011
- Ministry of Justice
2011 Statistics on Foreigners Registered in Japan. <http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/> Accessed on October 30, 2011
- Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare
2010 Statistics on Foreign Migrant Workers. Tokyo: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare.
- Ministry of Justice
2011 "Kodo Jinzai ni Taisuru Pointo-sei ni yoru Shutsunyukoku Kanrijo no Yugu Seido" (Preferential Policy for Highly Qualified Foreign Migrants) <http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/>
- Ministry of Justice
2010 Basic Plan for Immigration Control. 4th Edition. Tokyo: Ministry of Justice.
- Ministry of Justice
2009 Immigration Control. Tokyo: Ministry of Justice.
- Murakami, Yukiko
2009 "Incentive for International Migration of Scientists and Engineers to Japan." *International Migration*. 47(4): 67-91.
- National Institute of Population and Social Security Research
2012 "Nihon no Shorai Suikei Jinko" (Population Projections in Japan). Tokyo
- Nihon Keizai Shinbun
2011 "Jinko Chijimu Nihon Fukuramu Sekai" (Shrinking Japan, Expanding World). October 27, 2011
- OECD
2011 International Migration Outlook 2011. Paris: OECD
- Repeta, Lawrence and Glenda Roberts
2010 "Immigrants or Temporary Workers? A Visionary Call for a "Japanese-style Immigration Nation." *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. http://japanfocus.org/-Glenda_S_-Roberts/3450

- Sakanaka, Hidenori
2012 *Jinko Hokai to Imin Kakumei (Demographic Collapse and Immigration Revolution)*. Tokyo: Nihon Kajo Shuppan.
- Sakanaka, Hidenori
2011 *Nihongata Imin Kokka he no Michi (Toward a Japanese-Style Immigrant Nation)*. Tokyo: Toshindo.
- Sakanaka, Hidenori
2010 "The Future of Japan's Immigration Policy: A Battle Diary" *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. <http://www.japanfocus.org/-Sakanaka-Hidenori/2396>
- Satake, Masaai
2011 *Zainichi Gaikokujin to Tabunka Kyosei: Chiiki Community no Shiten kara (Foreign Migrants and Multicultural Coexistence: From a Perspective of Local Communities)*. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.
- Tabuchi, Hiroko
2011 "Japan keeps high wall for foreign labor." *New York Times* (January 3, 2011)
- Tsukazaki, Hiroko
2008 *Gaikokujin Senmonshoku Gijutsushoku no Koyo Mondai (The problems and Conditions of Skilled Migrant Workers)*. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.
- United Nations
2001 *Replacement Migration: is it a solution to declining and ageing populations?* New York: United Nations
- Yomiuri Shinbun
2012 "Gaikokujin Kangoshi Nihongo no Shoheki wo Motto Sageyo" (Foreign Nurses and Care Workers: Lower Japanese Language Barriers" (January 29)