Vocalizing the "I" Word: Proposals and Initiatives on Immigration to Japan from the LDP and Beyond

Glenda S. Roberts

Summary

In recent years, various influential voices in Japan have proposed that the country open itself to immigration, in one form or another, as a partial solution to revitalize the economy, to prop up the demographic decline, and in recognition of already present streams of migrants who entered through "side" or "back" doors. Where will Japan go from here? This paper traces connections between developments in migration policy in recent years by examining relevant discourses on migration from government policy reports, interviews with bureaucrats, politicians and civil society organization representatives and other stakeholders. While pro-immigration voices are present, the prospect for any "opening up" of Japan remains murky, due in no small part to the failures evident in various policies that have been put forward up to this point as well as to the economic recessions of the past two decades, exacerbated by the disastrous earthquake and nuclear accident of 3/11. The "I" word remains contested.

Keywords: Japan, immigration policy, population decline, civil society organizations, multicultural coexistence, stakeholders

1. Introduction

At a conference at Meiji Gakuin University in 1995, a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) commented that Japan has no immigrants, only entrants. This statement more or less sums up Japan's immigration policy in the post-war period. Although a number of side-door[1] policies have allowed foreigners to enter in various categories, there has never been a policy to encourage the long-term settlement and integration of foreigners as immigrants. Indeed, as Kiriro Morita and Toshio Iyotani argued in 1994, unlike advanced nations in Europe in the post-war period, Japan did not experience a labor shortage in building up its economy because the country used the excess labor from those Japanese citizens repatriated from the colonies, as well as from its own countryside. The *zainichi* Korean and Taiwanese populations also provided labor.[2] Yet by the mid-1980s, when Japan was

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[1]   Many scholars have pointed to government policies that have brought new immigration to Japan's "side" door while not really opening the "front door." See, for instance, Kondo (2005) and Vogt (2007).

[2]   The term *zainichi* refers to Koreans and Chinese (and their descendants) who lost Japanese nationality in 1952 after the San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed but remained in Japan.

experiencing its own economic bubble, labor was becoming scarce, particularly in "3D" (difficult, dangerous, dirty) jobs. Through various side-door policies (acceptance of people of Japanese descent on long-term visas accommodated by the 1990 revision of the Immigration Control Act; use of the "entertainer" visa to fill labor demand in the water trades;[3] trainee and technical intern programs which functioned as *de facto* guest worker programs), as well as through the overstaying of tourist visas, foreigners came in increasing numbers to live and work and marry in Japan, in many cases bringing their families with them, or making new families subsequently. Despite the decade of recession following the burst of Japan's housing market bubble in 1991 and the more recent fiscal crises following the U.S. sub-prime loan bubble debacle of 2008 (referred to in Japan as the "Lehman Shock"), many migrants have stayed and many more continue to arrive, although there have been slight decreases in their number due to the aforementioned financial crises and the Great East Japan Earthquake and nuclear disaster of 2011. One of the consequences of the reality of a burgeoning foreigner population without national governmental policy and adequate fiscal support for the infrastructure of a multicultural society has been gaps and inconsistencies in the provision of social welfare, education, medical treatment, housing and so on, for these residents. The brunt of the work of integrating foreign residents into society has fallen to local governments and civil society organizations, who, lacking sufficient resources, have only been able to make piecemeal albeit valiant efforts (Tsuda 2006).

A repercussion of the failure to create a comprehensive policy is that some of the newcomer population has been rendered vulnerable, and a very small number have turned to crime. The crime rate of the foreign population is continually sensationalized in the media, with even the crime of overstaying one's visa considered heinous and threatening to the social order. The ubiquitous government campaigns to crack down on undocumented foreigners have fueled this sensationalization. This, I would argue, has led to unease and even fear among the general public over the issue of opening the country to further migration. Yet fears from another direction—the fear of the consequences of the rapidly aging, low birth-rate society—are now propelling some academics and politicians to advocate a genuine opening of Japan to immigrants in the near future. But I get ahead of myself. Let me first give an overview of the current trends in residency of foreigners in Japan.

The year 2008 saw the largest number of foreigners ever registered as residents in Japan, the first year to top the two million mark, at 2,217,426 people. This number dropped by 31,305 registrants in 2009 due to the poor economy after the Lehman

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[3]   In Japanese, "*mizu shōbai*" ("water trades") refers to nightlife industries such as bars, pubs, clubs, etc. There was a demand for foreign female workers in this industry as singers, dancers and bar hostesses, as Japanese women's labor participation rates in this industry fell with Japan's growing affluence in the 1980s (Douglass 2003).

Shock.[4] There was another major drop in foreign registrants after the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011 and the subsequent nuclear disaster. The population of foreign registrants in September 2011 stood at 2,088,872 (MOJ 2012). The majority of foreign residents currently come from China (32.3 percent), North and South Korea (26.4 percent), Brazil (10.3 percent), the Philippines (10 percent) and Peru (2.6 percent). Although foreign residents can be found all over the country, in both rural and urban areas, their heaviest concentration is in Tokyo, followed by the Osaka, Aichi, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Hyōgo and Shizuoka Prefectures (MOJ 2011). Of the total number of residents in 2011 (2,088,872), some 1,105,964 are temporary, while 982,908 are permanent residents, and 392,831 are *zainichi* special permanent residents (MOJ 2011). In 2011, registered foreign residents made up approximately 1.7 percent of Japan's population of 126.5 million people. While 1.7 percent may seem inconsequential compared to the proportions of foreign residents in the rest of the developed world, to the Japanese, the number of foreigners is highly perceptible and a cause for comment. It should be noted, however, that many of the people counted as "foreign residents" in the statistics are Japan-born, even now into the fourth generation in the case of the *zainichi* population—the "special permanent residents" who make up almost 19 percent of all registered foreigners—but Japan's citizenship principle is based on *jus sanguinis* rather than *jus soli* (Kashiwazaki 1998).

2. Population Decline and Response

In 2000, a United Nations report suggested that in order for Japan to maintain its population in the face of the coming population decline, it would need to accept about 381,000 foreign migrants annually, and if Japan desired to bring the size of the working-age population back to the 1995 level (87.2 million) and keep it that way, the country would need to allow 609,000 migrants to enter annually until 2050. In this latter scenario, the report notes, "The number of post-1995 immigrants and their descendants would be 46 million, accounting for 30 percent of the total population in 2050" (UNPD 2000: 49–51). At the time, this declaration made big headlines and, indeed, it has reverberated in academic writings as well as policy documents. While the projection by the United Nations report may have been a kind of unwelcome wake-up call, it certainly was not taken as a serious policy direction. There is a range of opinion among academics, as well as amongst economic federations, civil society organizations and government ministries, as to how the immigration framework should be changed. None of the above parties look to immigration as the

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[4]   According to Yoshihisa Morimoto of the Bank of Japan (2012: 2), due to the fall in demand from the U.S. and Europe after the global financial crisis brought on by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, "real GDP in Japan recorded a decline of more than 10 percent on an annualized basis—a larger drop than that in the United States—for two consecutive quarters from the October–December quarter of 2008."

main solution to the problem of the low birth rate. On the other hand, no one is calling for a cessation to migration. Parties differ in their opinions on what sort of migrant workers should be encouraged to come to Japan, what sort of occupations they should undertake, and under what kind of conditions they should work and live.

In an earlier paper written in 2007, I reviewed how the prospect of increased immigration has been portrayed in writings by academics as well as by politicians and bureaucrats (Roberts 2008). At the time, no organization was advocating for substantially increased levels of immigration aimed at the long-term stay and integration of foreigners into Japanese society. Indeed, the level being discussed by government officials was a maximum cap of three percent of the population. Over the past few years, the government has stepped up its policy initiatives on the low birth-rate society through efforts, for example, to make child-rearing more compatible with work. There is also discussion of pushing back the retirement age and encouraging senior citizens to remain active in the labor force. Furthermore, house helper humanoid robots are being developed to make up for a lack of red-blooded caregivers (Coulmas 2007; Robertson 2008). Only very rarely is immigration ever mentioned as a possible strategy to assist in the transition to a much lower population level. Newcomer foreign populations are referred to as "foreign workers," not as immigrants.

In this context, it is highly interesting that the leading business newspaper, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, on September 28, 2009, issued a long editorial entitled Population Crises Questions National Strategy: Immigration Policy Inescapable, in which the editor-in-chief Ikuo Hirata called for a strategic plan on migration:

> This is a theme we must consider for a national strategic plan: How can we raise the current 1.7 percent share of foreigners in the population? We must not forget that it is a reality we can no longer postpone deliberating. The age when we will face shortages in the fields of medicine and caregiving, agriculture, industry, and R&D is right before our eyes.

The demographic problem that the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* refers to is that in 2005 Japan had the highest life expectancy at birth (81.9 years) and the oldest population in the world (Goodman and Harper 2007). Given the low birth rate, demographers predict that by 2025, almost 30 percent of the population will be over 65, and only two people between ages 15 to 64 will support each person age 65 or over (currently about three workers support every retiree). According to Vaclav Smil (2007: 4), the greatest problem is not the loss of 25 or 35 million people by 2050, but rather the fact of an unprecedented aging of the population, wherein Japan could have "nearly five million people in their 90s and […] more than half a million […] centenarians." Naturally, not all of these elder citizens will be healthy and autonomous, so the strain on public health, not to mention pension issues, will be very large indeed.

The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* suggested in 2009 that a strategic plan for immigration be formulated and put in place under the newly formed National Strategy Division

(*Kokka Senryaku Kyoku* under the leadership of Naoto Kan, DPJ, prime minister of Japan in 2010/2011), but as of 2009 they saw no evidence in the Democratic Party's (DPJ) Manifesto of such a vision nor had they heard of it from any of the members of the cabinet. The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* mentioned the plan of Hidenori Sakanaka, former Ministry of Justice (MOJ) bureaucrat, as one with potential. I will refer to this later on in the paper.

3. *Nikkei* Brazilians and Peruvians: Recent Trends

Were it not for the global economic downturn of 2008, Japan may have been closer to having an official immigration policy by now. The global economic downturn of 2008 has severely affected Japan's industries, with auto and auto parts-related industries especially hard-hit. As the majority of *nikkeijin*[5] are employed in the auto industry, they have suffered extensive lay-offs. Over 50 percent of those employed in manufacturing were laid off, according to the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (2009/10/19).

Because housing is often tied to one's employment through company welfare, people also became homeless or had trouble paying rent. Much of the private educational structure in international schools some of the workers' children had enjoyed was also dismantled, as parents, unable to afford tuitions, withdrew their children. Many children subsequently were left with no place in any education system.[6]

On January 9, 2009, under the Tarō Asō Cabinet, the Council for the Promotion of Measures for Foreign Residents was established to deal mainly with the problems that *nikkeijin* residents were facing in the global economic crisis (this council was placed into the Cabinet Office for Policies on a Cohesive (*kyōsei*) Society, alongside myriad other social issues such as the work-life balance, food education, traffic safety, barrier-free policy, youth development, low birth rate, victims of crime, the aging society, suicide prevention, international exchange, and policies for the disabled). In April 2009, the Council came up with a support measures plan to assist *nikkeijin* in education (including enrollment of children in public schools and language support), employment assistance and vocational training (particularly for caregiving and language skills), housing, and voluntary repatriation (CPMFR 2009). By July 16, 2009, nationwide 7,491 people had applied for financial assistance in returning home (*Chūbu Yomiuri Shimbun* 2009/07/27). At first, the voluntary repatriation assistance stipulated that those repatriating with assistance could never

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5   The term *nikkeijin* refers to persons of Japanese ancestry who are welcomed back to Japan with facilitated entry and working regulations.

6   That is a lack of Japanese skills prevented some children from thriving in Japanese schools, especially those children who had been attending private ethnic schools in their native languages but who had to withdraw due to their parents' tightened economic straits after the Lehman Shock. See Matsumoto (2011).

return to Japan in the future on long-term visas. After receiving public criticism, however, this was revised in May 2009 to a three-year waiting period before possible re-entrance on a long-term visa (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun* 2009/05/23). By the program's end on March 31, 2010, 21,675 *nikkei* Brazilians (92.5 percent), Peruvians (4.2 percent) and others (3.3 percent) had repatriated under this scheme (MHLW 2011). Residence figures for 2009 show a decrease of 49,511 in the number of foreign nationals from Brazil—a 15.6 percent decrease from 2008, leaving the 2009 total of 267,456 (MOJ 2011). Many of those who remained were out of work due to the sudden decline of the auto and auto parts-related industries.

4. Recent Policy Change in the ICRRA

On July 15, 2009, the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (ICRRA, *Shutsunyūkoku kanri oyobi nanmin nintei-hō*) was amended, and I will note some of the changes here. The main thrust is a new system of residency management for foreigners whereby the MOJ is the sole agency tracking foreigners' residency, immigration status and employment status. Previously, these functions were shared by the MOJ and the local governments, but the new system houses all functions under one roof and creates a new biometric "residency card" for all foreigners on stays of over three months, except special permanent residents. The government claims this will make it easier to provide social welfare to foreign residents, but civil society organizations have criticized it as being a violation of privacy and a means to make the lives of undocumented people even more precarious. Other features of the amended ICRRA are that the much-maligned trainee system has been revised to allow coverage of the Labor Standards Act (*Rōdō kijun-hō*) to all trainees and technical interns throughout the three years of their stay, and the Minimum Wage Law (*Saitei chingin-hō*) shall now cover technical interns. I should note, however, that advocacy groups still object to the system because it is still called a "trainee program," while in fact it is a guest labor program, and because these workers have no freedom to change employers (MOJ 2009).[7]

5. Economic Partnership Agreements and Migration Policy: Significant Change?

Another new development in recent years has been the arrival in Japan of Indonesians and Filipinos to work in nursing and caregiving on-the-job training programs under Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA). The EPA with Indonesia, part of which allows for bringing in workers for employment in nursing and

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[7] Ippei Torii, head of the Solidarity Network with Migrants Japan and secretary-general of the Zentōitsu Workers Union, in a talk given at the Graduate School of Asia Pacific Studies, Waseda University, on February 4, 2011, noted his dissatisfaction that these programs continue to exist under the front (*tatemae*) of training programs when they are in fact guest worker programs on the cheap.

caregiving sectors, came into force on July 1, 2008 (Stott 2008). The Philippines ratified its EPA with Japan on September 10, 2008 (Ager 2008/10/09). In the first two years of the agreements, from each country up to 400 people aiming to be nurses and 600 aiming to be caregivers were to come to Japan. In both agreements, nurses were given six months of Japanese language training. They may stay up to three years total. Caregiving candidates also receive the six months of language training, and then enter their workplaces for four years, after which they may take the national examination for caregivers. The hurdle for both groups is to take the national caregiving or nursing examination in Japanese. If they do not pass, they must return home. As of August 2010, 370 nurses and 510 caregivers from the two nations had been conditionally accepted (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2010/08/25). The public reception of the Indonesian nurses and caregivers has been fairly positive. I have seen several television programs showing them at work, and popular news magazines such as *Wedge* (2009: 28–36) also portray them as hard-working and well-trained. *Wedge* reported that the Kashiwa Tanaka Hospital in Chiba translated the national nursing exam into English and had the Indonesian nurses take it. Except for a section testing them on knowledge of the Japanese social welfare system, almost all the nurses scored 80 percent or above on the test. Rie Kada, the deputy board chair of this hospital noted that if they included letters from the Japanese syllabaries (*rubi*) over the *kanji* characters in the test, foreign nurses would have no trouble passing it. In 2010, three nurses (two Indonesians and one Filipina) out of 254 from the Philippines and Indonesia who took the national nursing exam passed it. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* noted that facilities that accepted these nurses were given the very heavy burden of educating them sufficiently to pass the test in Japanese, and that the number of facilities willing to accept these workers is declining as both facilities and candidates are victims of this ill-conceived plan (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2010/03/27).

While one might think that this is the trial stage of a large program to bring in workers for the understaffed care sector, which is likely to be faced with severe shortages of labor under rapid demographic decline, for the time being the government insists this is merely an international exchange, not an expansion of the foreign worker labor market. Hence comes the nearly impossible hurdle of passing the respective national exams in Japanese if these workers are to remain in Japan working as nurses or caregivers. There is a history to this, pointing to different stances that various ministries take on the issue of foreign labor importation, with the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the MOFA being relatively pro-immigration, while the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) and the Japanese Nursing Association have quite the opposite view (Roberts 2008). Indeed, when I interviewed MHLW officials in May of 2006, one official expressed quite explicitly his negative sentiments in regard to bringing in foreign caregivers and nurses unless they were totally fluent in the Japanese language. He remarked that Japan has to think about whether or not to open

migration further. He noted all the problems the EU has had with migration recently—France's riots, Germany, the U.K. He voiced anxiety about public safety in Japan, and mentioned the trial of a *nikkei* Peruvian man who was arrested for murdering a little boy. Public safety is bad, he said, and there are many education problems with *nikkeijin*, problems with the lack of health insurance, and with gangs—that is, how do you prevent gangs from forming when you have kids dropping out at elementary school? He also said these things cost money. Where would the budget come from to solve such problems? The interesting thing to me about this exchange was that the problems he noted have been caused by the dearth of government policy in regard to *nikkeijin*. Had there been sound policy to support the economic, social, linguistic and educational lives of *nikkeijin* from the beginning, such problems would surely have been reduced. Furthermore, throughout the interview, the official exhibited a great reluctance toward the notion of adjusting the work content in nursing homes and hospitals so that foreign caregivers might fit in more easily.

Nurses and caregivers from those EPA are now indeed working in Japan, and the media are offering sympathetic portrayals of these workers that also indicate anxiety that Japan will be criticized for having accepted them under false pretenses. A 2010 editorial in the *Asahi Shimbun* (2010/08/25) noted:

> While singing a song of having an interchange of skilled, talented personnel, in actual fact, isn't this the same as bringing people in on a limited basis and then sending them packing? The world is going to surely doubt whether Japan really wanted these people in the first place.

It might be that the public sympathy garnered for them will be enough to change the examination language requirement, in which case we will have seen the first opening of a door to the immigration of skilled nurses and care workers. In a recent paper, Gabriele Vogt (2009) analyses the EPA as "an invisible policy shift" toward international health-care migration to Japan. Indeed this was confirmed in an interview I held in February 2010 with an official of the Ministry of Justice.

In the most recent news on the EPA nurses and caregivers, nurses have made gains in passing the exam, but the percentage passing is still low. Of the 415 nurses taking the national exam in February 2012, 47 people (11.3 percent) passed. This is compared to the 90.1 percent passing rate of Japanese exam takers (*Asahi Shimbun* 2012/03/27). Of the 94 EPA caregivers taking the caregiving exam after three years of on-the-job training, 38 percent passed (36 people) as compared to a pass rate of 64 percent among Japanese exam takers (*Asahi Shimbun* 2012/03/30). As of 2013, the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare (since 2011) Yoko Komiyama told the press, the nursing exam will have pronunciation guides in Japanese alphabets for all *kanji* characters (the past test had these guides only for those characters deemed the most difficult), and they will also extend the testing time, but they will not allow the test to be taken in English. Furthermore, those foreigners who failed the caregivers

examination will be allowed to extend their stay in the country for one more year rather than being sent home, if they fulfill certain conditions (*Asahi Shimbun* 2012/03/23). Hirofumi Noguchi and Keishi Takahashi (2012/03/30) noted in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, however, that less than 50 percent of those nurses who failed yet were given the opportunity to stay on longer agreed to do so. In fact, because nursing facilities have had difficulties in training the EPA candidates to pass the exams, as the years go by, fewer facilities are accepting these candidates. Nevertheless, Japan has entered a new EPA to bring in caregivers and nurses from Vietnam, and Thailand and India are in the offing. If an additional 900,000 nursing care workers are really needed by 2025 as is claimed in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* article, one wonders how this goal will be met.

6. Multicultural Coexistence (*Tabunka kyōsei*)

As we have established, Japan has no official immigration policy at present, although there are numerous ways by which people have entered the country, stayed long-term, become permanent residents, or even become naturalized. Since Japan is not officially a country of immigration, we might suppose that it lacks policies and legal frameworks for the inclusion of residents who are not Japanese—after all, the nation is not actively attempting to integrate foreigners nor is it encouraging them to settle, as we have seen in the previous examples of *nikkei* Brazilians and EPA caregivers and nurses. There is also no legal framework, such as Korea has, to forbid discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity. Yet in fact, there is a kind of policy geared toward assisting foreigners to live in their locales. Not surprisingly, it did not begin as a policy of the central government, since the central government has not been actively pursuing immigration. It began rather at the local level, in Kawasaki City in the early 1990s, born out of the interaction between Kawasaki and its large community of *zainichi*, and was termed *tabunka kyōsei,* or "Multicultural Coexistence." The concept was taken up subsequently in the mid-1990s by a group helping those foreigners who had fallen victim to the Hanshin Awaji Earthquake; by 2004 the concept had spread, and centers to support foreign residents had sprung up in Osaka, Hyōgo, Kyoto, Hiroshima and Tokyo (Yamashita 2010: 331).

Yamashita rightly asks the question: "Is *tabunka kyōsei* Japan's version of multiculturalism?" The resounding reply, not only from Yamashita but also from others (see, for instance, Iwabuchi 2010) is "No." The central government (Coordination Agency) did go on to co-opt the terminology of multicultural coexistence in June of 2005 when it established a research group entitled Research Group to Encourage Multicultural Coexistence. That group published a report the following March entitled Report on the Research Group to Encourage Multicultural Coexistence—Toward Encouraging Multicultural Coexistence in the Local Communities. As Yamashita reports, the term then became official, and was disseminated to locales nationwide. The report defined "multicultural coexistence"

as "where people of differing nationalities or ethnicities, etc., live together as constituent members of local society while forging equal relationships as they recognize each other's cultural differences." Yamashita sees nothing wrong *per se* in this definition, but he does point out a few areas for consideration. The first is the emphasis on "local society." He notes that the reason "local society" is used is that the Japanese Constitution gives rights only to Japanese nationals and omits any mention of foreigners, but the mandate of the Local Autonomy Law (*Chihō jichitai-hō*) is to ensure the safety, health and welfare of the "residents," foreign residents included. Hence, through its wording, Yamashita notes that the central government is clearly and cleverly "passing the buck" (*marunage*) to the local governments. Second, Yamashita analyzes a pamphlet on multicultural coexistence published by the Tokyo municipal government. In this pamphlet, he notes, "foreigners" are set against "we Japanese." "We Japanese" are assumed to be of the same nationality and ethnicity, whereas "foreigners" are differentiated, their cultural and other diversity something to be recognized. There is no sense here that "foreigners" might become Japanese nationals, no complicating the term "Japanese." Last, he points out that the "culture" in this cultural recognition is essentialist, and that it goes no further than the level of the "3F:" Fashion, Festivals, and Food (Yamashita 2010: 332), or what he notes Tessa Morris-Suzuki in 2002 referred to as "cosmetic multiculturalism." Yamashita (2010: 332) concludes, "From the beginning, the Japanese State does not even have an immigration policy, and only positions the foreigners who come into the country from the standpoint of immigration control. So in that sense, one cannot call Multicultural Coexistence 'Multiculturalism.'" And in that sense, multicultural coexistence is at present only a local piecemeal initiative, not a policy with a strong fiscal backbone from the central government that would provide substantial resources (for instance, Japanese as second language (JSL) and adult education programs, and curriculum content recognizing diversity in society). This is not to criticize those local governments who actually are carrying out some mutually beneficial projects aiming to incorporate all the residents in their locales; Yamashita as well as others (Yamawaki 2012/02/01) give examples of programs in Japan that go way beyond seeing "foreigners" in terms of the "3F" alone. However, there is only so much that locales can do without strong initiatives and funding from the central government (see also Tsuda 2006). Scholar and activist Keizō Yamawaki (2012/02/01), in a recent opinion piece, noted that while the central government has been very slow in social integration projects for the foreign resident population, local governments have been instrumental in actively pursuing policies to welcome the diversity that a foreign population brings.

At this juncture it is interesting to analyze how national policy makers or lobbyists approach the topic of immigration. Who is arguing for it, where do they situate the necessity for it, how do they argue for it, what kind of immigration is it that they seek, and what kind of society do they see resulting from it?

7. Recent Policy Statements from Influential Stakeholders, Opinion Leaders, and Political Parties

7.1 LDP

In 2008, inside its Division of National Strategy, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had formed a project team of 23 members, entitled The Road to a Japanese-style Immigration Nation. On June 20, 2008, it produced a report entitled Opening the Country to Human Resources! Proposal for a Japanese-style Immigration Policy: Towards Building a Country where [People] Yearn to Immigrate (NIKMPC 2008). In the document, they conceptualize a society where in 50 years ten percent of the population will be immigrants, and they state they would announce this goal worldwide within one year. As categories of migrants, they list the highly skilled and skilled laborers who have trained in Japan, students, families of immigrants (with family integration rights guaranteed), those requiring humanitarian consideration (refugees, returnees from North Korea with Japanese wives, and others) and investors. They suggest introducing a point system to make immigration a fair and clearly understood process. The strategy is too dense to note in detail, but it incorporates plans to develop immigrants through language education and other training, and to foster social integration for a multicultural coexistence policy. They advocate establishing an Immigration Agency (*Iminchō*) with its own governmental minister. Moreover, in the cabinet, they would within one year establish a Foreign Human Resource Strategy Division. Furthermore, within three years they suggest setting up multicultural coexistence education in elementary and junior high schools to foster correct views of foreigners in Japan's youth (NIKMPC 2008: 8). Opportunities to learn about multicultural coexistence would also be made available in adult education classes, and community activities would be set up promoting coexistence with foreigners through cultural exchange. Furthermore, an Ethnic Discrimination Law would be passed.

This plan obviously died on the vine, since the LDP lost the election in September 2009. Yet the fact that none of the grand designs had been implemented by that time leads one to suspect that not all members of the LDP felt the time was ripe—especially given the poor economic outlook in 2008. Nevertheless, surely the fact that the LDP formed the team that came up with such a bold plan is significant.

What is remarkable about this plan is that it is not merely a bid for highly skilled labor but also allows for family reunification and seeks to give newcomers the necessary language and other training to adjust to life in Japan, while expediting the process to full citizenship without discrimination. Furthermore, it is situated in an awareness that laws against discrimination on the basis of ethnicity would have to be passed, and that the Japanese populace would need to be educated toward acceptance of these new members of the nation. This proposal is quite revolutionary, and indeed it proved to be extremely unpopular in some circles. The Honorable

Hidenao Nakagawa, the LDP house member who brought the initiative to then Prime Minister (in office 2007–2008) Yasuo Fukuda in June 2008 was the target of nasty commentary by right-wing bloggers, who believed the proposal was "selling the country down the river" (Nakagawa 2011/02/01).[8] While apparently that and the fallout from the Lehman Shock were enough to keep this proposal from going anywhere, Member of Parliament (MP) Nakagawa (2011/02/01) still stands by it and feels that Japan needs such a plan in order to inject new vitality into the society as the population declines.

Given the steadfast reluctance of the Japanese government to engage actively in front-door immigration, how did this plan get as far as it did? The initial impetus of the plan, according to MP Nakagawa (2011/02/01), was concern over the plummeting economic growth rate and concern for the shortage of workers in caregiving. MP Nakagawa was asked by MP (House of Councillors) Hirohiko Nakamura to chair the LDP Alliance of Diet Members to Promote the Exchange of Foreign Resources. MP Nakamura himself had experience in social welfare issues and was on the board of several social welfare foundations. MP Nakagawa, a proponent of trade liberalization active in economic policy, claimed it is also out of his concern for increasing economic growth that he advanced these proposals on immigration policy. In his talk at Waseda University in December 2010, he remarked that Japan in the past twenty years has become a society that discriminates against and excludes not only migrants but also women, youth, and middle-aged men. He suggested that aiming for a growth rate of four percent would enable all of these groups to find decent employment. He argued that the blame for Japan's poor performance in the past two decades can be placed on its propensity to value homogeneity, exclusivity and concealment, all values he suggested Japan would do better without. Furthermore, he argued that Japan should come up with a new public nature (*kokyōsei*) that displays diversity, inclusiveness and disclosure.

According to MP Nakagawa, the Alliance formulated their statement with considerable advice from Hidenori Sakanaka, who established the Japan Immigration Policy Institute (JIPI) in 2005 after having spent much of his career as a bureaucrat in the MOJ Immigration Bureau. Let us now turn to Sakanaka's views.

7.2 Sakanaka Hidenori, JIPI

Sakanaka has numerous immigration-related publications to his name, and, according to Eika Tai (2004: 357), he has been influential "in shaping the public discourse on a multiethnic Japan." He is the author of, in 2007, *Imin kokka Nippon: 1000man nin no imin ga Nihon o sukuu* (Immigration State Japan: Ten Million Immigrants Save Japan) and in 2009, *Nihongata imin kokka no kōsō* (Towards a

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[8]   He stated, "Boku wa gokai da to omou kedo, iwayuru kuni o uru teigen de aru to" (Interview with MP Nakagawa Hidenao, 2011/02/01).

Japanese-style Immigration Nation). As one can see from these titles, he aligns himself with the LDP project team of 23 in his strong assertion that ten million migrants should be accepted by 2050, and that building a new nation with immigrants will lend vitality to Japan and create a prosperous future. In particular, he advocates for an immigration model that takes young foreigners, trains them in Japan's high schools and universities, assists them in finding work, gives them permanent residence, and makes it easier for them to obtain Japanese citizenship. He suggests that this can be paid for in part by redirecting Official Development Assistance funds to this purpose.[9]

In an interview with me (2009/11/05), Sakanaka commented on Ikuo Hirata's article from September 28, 2009 in *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, remarking that this was just what Japan needed to convince the public of the importance of bringing immigration policy to the forefront of strategic planning for Japan's future. He noted that several news articles in 2009 used the term *imin* (immigrant) rather than "foreign worker," which he took as a sign that the media are coming around to the idea of immigration in Japan. He also mentioned that he is in favor of amnesty for Japan's undocumented immigrants, whom he noted are only a very small number of people at any rate. Interestingly, Sakanaka remarked that one thing that would need to be changed for Japan to become an immigration nation is Article One of the Constitution, which states, "The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people." One can only imagine the problems that would arise if someone were to attempt to revise this article.

7.3 DPJ

The DPJ, currently in power, issued its own draft statement on the Proposal Concerning the Foreign Worker Problem in March of 2008 (MGRMSC 2008). The DPJ had created a team in 2006 entitled the DPJ Working Team on the Foreign Worker Problem. The proposal is much less ambitious than that of the LDP team. First of all, it is limited to *nikkeijin* and foreign trainee policy issues, whom they refer to as "foreign workers;" this is not an immigration policy statement. Among their ideas are to reassess the current side-door labor policy for *nikkeijin* and instead establish a three-year guest worker scheme for simple labor, crack down on exploitative employers in the trainee system and those hiring *nikkei* workers, and make certain that these workers are enrolled in health and employment insurance schemes. For *nikkeijin* workers, they advocate initially allowing them in to work as individuals for the first three years, and only allowing them to bring in their families after that if they have met conversational Japanese language standards and if they send their children to school, as well as have proof of paying taxes. In these cases they would be allowed "permanent resident" status. The proposal also advocates

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[9]   For an overview of this book's policies, see Repeta and Roberts (2010).

making schooling mandatory for the children of *nikkeijin* and providing more opportunities for their Japanese language acquisition. Last there is mention of dispatching bilingual policemen in cases where local people and *nikkeijin* have trouble, and installing training courses on basic social rules in Japan when foreigners enter the country or apply for a visa extension. There is nothing in the proposal mentioning the economic threat of the low birth-rate society, or suggesting a large-scale opening of the country to immigration. Indeed, the proposal, as its title suggests, is limited to the "foreign worker problem," yet with no consideration of amnesty for the long-term resident undocumented foreigner population. There is also nothing in the 2010 DPJ Manifesto regarding immigration policy. However, it is not the case that no one in the DPJ is sympathetic to such a policy. In 2003, for instance, House of Councillors member Koji Matsui, together with six other politicians, came out with a policy position paper entitled Thoughts on Receiving 10 Million Immigrants, wherein they suggest that foreigners would act as a "trigger to the economy." They proposed scrapping vague-sounding standards such as "highly educated" and "those with special skills," in favor of making a concrete and clear vision to strategically bring in immigrants. They also suggest that an influx of foreigners would provide stimulation to Japan's unproductive white collar workers (Matsui 2010). Indeed MP Nakagawa suggested that he had worked with DPJ members when he made the 2008 proposal, and that there are still politicians in the DPJ who desire a large-scale immigration policy, but in the current economy it would be impossible to make it happen.

7.4 *Keidanren*

In April of 2009, the Japan Business Federation, *Keidanren*, published a report entitled Toward Developing and Securing Competitive Human Resources, which featured a large section on policy recommendations for developing and retaining foreign talent (NKDR 2009). The section begins with the recognition of the ever extreme foreign competition, and it urges Japan to promote diversity in its economic society by incorporating diverse know-how, values, and original ideas. The document lays out a design for bringing this to fruition. Promoting long-term residency of both those currently seen as being in professional and technical fields and those who have acquired a certain credential or skill, they called for a deliberation on a "Japanese Immigration Policy" (*Nihon-gata imin seisaku*) (NKDR 2009: 7). In this document, they proposed "three ideals" under which this policy should be carried out: 1) making a country where foreigners would want to reside long-term; 2) preparing for a system that would actually enable the long-term residency of foreigners; and 3) making the conditions for long-term residency transparent and stably implemented (NKDR 2009: 8).

To bring about the "multicultural coexistence society," they recommended carrying out a determined policy to admit greater numbers of foreigners, particularly those

who could add a little something extra to Japan's domestic industries, and they argued that these people would contribute to the sustenance and expansion of Japanese employment overall. They acknowledged that there are those who advise caution about the negative effects of immigrant workers on the domestic labor market, so they recommended keeping the burden on the employment status quo to a minimum by preparing an orderly system of immigration.

The report proceeded with concrete plans to create an environment for bringing in foreign human resources, including rethinking the current residency credentialing system to make it more fair and transparent, creating a residence and employment management system that is more thorough, providing a solid social security system, improving foreigners' living environment including national fiscal support and coordination for JSL training and rental housing assistance, as well as international school subsidies, and easing necessary conditions for permanent residency. They also recommended enacting a basic law to promote a "multicultural coexistence society," accompanied by a cabinet-level post for a minister of multicultural coexistence society (NKDR 2009: 13). Finally, it included a substantial section on strategies to bring in, train and hire more foreign students.

It is quite clear, and not surprising, that the main organization representing private sector business in Japan is calling for Japan to overhaul its current system and bring in foreign workers in substantial numbers with the expectation that they would make long-term contributions to society. The 2009 statement is the most detailed I have seen yet, and it is based on surveys of other countries' systems of immigration.

7.5 Solidarity Network with Migrants in Japan

There are also many civil society organizations in Japan that work toward improving living and working conditions for foreign residents and lobby the government actively to create a "multicultural coexistence society" (*tabunka kyōsei shakai*). Beginning as groups that supported the *zainichi* Korean "oldcomer" population and expanding to encompass numerous support organizations for "newcomer" foreigners living in Japan, civil society organizations have proved essential in upholding the rights of the foreign population and contributing in crucial ways where government assistance was totally lacking (Roberts 2003; Shipper 2005, 2008; Milly 2005; Yamanaka 2006). Many of these groups challenge the current immigration policy framework by, for instance, advocating that overstayers who have lived peaceful and productive lives in Japan for many years now should be granted amnesty, or by insisting that the current technical trainee system is a sham and should be replaced by a system allowing migrant workers to perform blue-collar work as regular workers under the Labor Standards Act (Torii 2006, 2011, 2011/02/04; Nakajima 2006/11/07). Some write books exposing the scapegoating by politicians and media of foreign migrants as criminals (GSUN2004). Some oppose the new move toward heightened surveillance and control through ID cards (Nichibenren 2006). The

voices of such citizens groups may lack the strength of the economic organizations, but they nonetheless maintain international networks and are savvy about using external pressure and human rights arguments to bolster their concerns. Of course, these groups have differences among themselves, and one cannot claim they maintain a united front on all issues. One of the main groups is Solidarity Network with Migrants Japan (SMJ), a network consisting of civil society organizations and labor unions, formed in 1997. In 2009, they published a thick book of policy recommendations entitled The Future of a Multicultural Coexistence Society (SMJ 2009a). SMJ regularly holds hearings with officials of relevant government ministries on pressing issues currently facing migrant populations in Japan. While it is difficult to assess the extent to which this sort of hearing is effective in changing immigration policy, a bureaucrat at one such session in November 2009 remarked to me that such sessions were important to the ministries as they gave them crucial ground-level perspectives which they otherwise would lack. As Goodman (2008: 331) notes, "migrant populations are themselves neither passive in the face of state policies nor homogenous in their reactions towards them." As increasing numbers of migrants become permanent residents and naturalized citizens, one can expect their participation in groups such as SMJ only to increase.

8. After the Great East Japan Earthquake

As one might expect, there has been little official movement on new migration initiatives since the Great East Japan Earthquake and nuclear disaster of March 11, 2011. The country has been consumed by issues of disaster relief, rebuilding, and energy policy. Sakanaka (2012) has published another book, *Jinkō hakai to imin kakumei* (Population Crash and the Immigration Revolution), and is busy promoting it. He may have found an audience: just recently in a press interview, the cabinet minister in charge of the low birth-rate policy, MP Masaharu Nakagawa, stated, "In reality, there are many foreigners [living] in Japan as *de facto* immigrants. Now is the time we must debate the way to accept foreigners [into the country]." He mentioned that countries, such as the U.S. and others in Northern Europe, were all thinking about immigration policies, and that Japan should also consider such issues and conceptualize what sort of nation Japan should be (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2012/02/24). Immigrant support groups such as SMJ and Asian People's Friendship Society were immediately active in helping support the people of the Tōhoku region after the disaster (Torii 2012). Their visibility and strong support for the local communities in the region has underscored the presence of foreign residents in Japan.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, after presenting a brief picture of the make-up of foreign residents in Japan at present, I discussed the challenges the coming demographic decline will pose for Japanese society, and how the topic is being approached by some important stakeholders. There is some evidence that despite the recent economic downturn, "foreign workers" are beginning to be considered a partial solution to demographic decline, although tentative calls for "debate" like that issued by Minister Nakagawa (above) hardly constitute a strong trend.

In its 2008 policy report, Opening of the Country to Human Resources! Proposal for a Japanese-style Immigration State, the LDP project team (NIKMPC 2008: 1) notes that besides an immigration *policy*,

> the consensus of the people is necessary. What we seek more than anything else is the determination (*ketsui*) and will (*kakugo*) to open the country to immigration. If we are welcoming foreigners as immigrants, we must provide workplaces where they can work with security. It is necessary to reform the socioeconomic system to make it responsive to the needs of immigrants.

When I met with Ippei Torii in 2009 (10/30), I asked him about this talk of consensus and will. He replied that it is up to the government to gather a consensus by making good policy, meaning a policy that would 1) recognize and legitimate all the immigrants who have already come in through various side and back doors throughout the years, and 2) build a secure future for those yet to come. That many have come into Japan despite the lack of an official immigration policy is evident. That a few people are entering through new agreements in nursing and caregiving is also evident. That there is a dedicated coterie of activists supporting the human rights of migrants has been evident from the outset. What remains to be been is whether or not and on what levels all this adds up to making Japan a nation where the word "immigration" gains voice in the coming decades.

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