

Chinese Immigrants – The Solution to Japan’s Demography Crisis?

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I. Introduction

Japan is shrinking. If trends continue, the working-age population will by 2050 drop from 81 million to 49 million – but the senior population will increase from 28 million to 37 million.¹ Such a mismatch would bring enormous economic and fiscal challenges, and as such, some Japanese leaders have been arguing for significant policy changes – including increased immigration to the island nation.

Even without a sweeping government mandate for more immigration, some change is already afoot. Over the past decade, the total number of foreigners living and working in Japan has steadily increased – and the number of Chinese has more than doubled. Many of these Chinese are well educated, highly skilled, and able to navigate the Japanese culture and language. This paper explores the phenomenon of Chinese immigration to Japan, and considers the question: Are Chinese immigrants uniquely suited to solve Japan’s demographic problem?

II. A Quiet Crisis – And a Solution?

Despite the current global downturn, the Japanese people enjoy a high standard of living, and their country boasts the world’s second-largest economy. However, all nations need a reliable body of workers to maintain or increase production of goods and services, drive consumption, and pay taxes to support the retired generation – and in a dangerous combination, Japan’s flow of workers is drying up, while its body of pensioners is ballooning. Whereas in 1960 there were 11 workers for every pensioner, today there are only two, and by 2050, the ratio will be about 1:1 if current demographic trends continue.² Japan would have to cut pensions and government services (reducing standards of living), impose higher taxes (dragging on economic growth), or embark on an unsustainable borrowing binge.

¹ The overall population could drop from 127 million down to 95 million. Japan Cabinet Office, “White Paper on Birthrate-Declining Society” <<http://www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/whitepaper/w-2008/20webhonpen/html/i1121000.html#i1121100>>, “CSV 形式のファイルはこちら” link.

² Andrew Taylor and David McNeill, Introduction to excerpt from “The Future of Japan’s Immigration Policy: a battle diary,” By Sakanaka Hidenori, Japan Focus <http://japanfocus.org/_Sakanaka_Hidenori-The_Future_of_Japan_s_Immigration_Policy_a_battle_diary> ; John Bongaarts, “Population Aging and the Rising Cost of Public Pensions,” Population and Development Review, March 2004, p. 12 <<http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/councilarticles/pdr/PDR301Bongaarts.pdf>>.

Some Japanese say this crisis should be addressed with an amalgam of policies that encourage births, raise female and elderly workforce participation, increase productivity, and tweak current immigration practices. However, others argue that Japan must throw open the door to foreign workers. Sakanaka Hidenori, a well-respected former Justice Ministry official who ran the Tokyo Immigration Bureau and now chairs a think tank on immigration, believes the country faces a choice between "Big Japan" and "Small Japan" – and that only the "Big" option of introducing over 20 million immigrants over the next 50 years would allow Japan to maintain its current pattern of economic growth.³ Sakanaka's ideas have been adopted in a plan by a group of Diet members from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party that calls for 10 million newcomers by the year 2050.⁴

Such a surge in the immigrant population would be a radical departure from Japan's past. Foreigners were largely forbidden until the Meiji Restoration of 1868, after which a smattering of Asian merchants and laborers made their way to Japan's port cities. To meet its wartime needs in the 1930s and 1940s, Imperial Japan conscripted slave labor from colonies such as Korea, its Chinese puppet state Manchukuo, and its POW camps – but after the defeat in 1945, most of these two million foreigners returned to their countries.⁵ And despite labor shortages, Japanese policy during the economic boom of the 1960s was to rely on domestic workers and increased automation.

Immigration picked up during the go-go 1980s, as Japanese companies scrambled to fill positions that were considered "dangerous, dirty, and demanding."⁶ Government and private-sector programs have brought in cheap labor, particularly from China.⁷ By 2006, the number of foreigners registered to live in Japan stood at 2 million, an increase from 1.36 million in 1995, and from 850,000 in 1985.⁸ Even so, this constituted a mere 1.63% of the population, a ratio still far below that of other advanced economies.⁹ Furthermore, many of these "foreigners" are Korean "Zainichi" who have been in Japan since WWII, or who were subsequently born to such people. In 2006, the Zainichi population was placed at 465,000.

Recent growth has been due in large part to immigrants from China, whose numbers rocketed from 272,230 in 1998 to 606,889 at the end of 2007, and who are now the largest foreign group in Japan.¹⁰ With its large pool of workers eager for higher wages, its proximity to Japan, and its relaxation of emigration controls, China has

³ In a related finding, a United Nations study determined that the country would need 17 million net immigrants from 2005 through 2050 in order to keep the population at around 127.5 million. "Replacement Migration: Is it a Solution to Declining and Aging Populations?" United Nations Population Division., 2001 <<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/ReplMigED/Japan.pdf>>

⁴ Masami Ito and Setsuko Kamiya, "Let 10% of Japan be foreigners: Nakagawa," The Japan Times Online 13 June 2008 <<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20080613a2.html>>.

⁵ Chikako Kashiwazaki and Tsuneo Akaha, "Japanese Immigration Policy: Responding to Conflicting Pressures," Migration Information Source, November 2006 <<http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=487>>. N.B. However, over half a million Koreans, as well as Chinese and others, remained in Japan.

⁶ In Japanese, "kitanai, kiken, kitsui," a term which gained popularity in the 1980s.

⁷ From 1992 to 2005, 287,095 of 416,009 participants in the Industrial Training Program and Technical Internship Program (administered by the governmental Japan International Training Cooperation Organization) were Chinese. <<http://www.jitco.or.jp/english/overview/statistics1.html>>.

⁸ Takaharo Kanaka, "Koreans here inclined to assimilate to dodge racism," Japan Times, 6 Aug. 2005 <<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20050806f1.html>>.

⁹ Japan, Ministry of Justice, "Immigration Control in Recent Years," p. 19 <<http://www.moj.go.jp/NYUKAN/nyukan68-3.pdf>>.

become, and will likely remain, one of the most dependable sources of immigrant labor for Japan.¹¹

III. Chinese Immigration, Past and Present

In modern times, Chinese have come to Japan in a series of four “generations.” The first generation, now known as the “old immigrants,” came between the Meiji Restoration and World War II. These people primarily settled in Kobe and Yokohama, now home to the largest Chinese communities in Japan. The second generation came between the end of World War II and the normalizing of Sino-Japanese relations in 1972.¹² During this period, many Taiwanese – who had long lived under Japanese rule, and some of whom spoke Japanese – made their way to Japan to work in a variety of industries and locations. In contrast, Cantonese immigrants of this era found difficulty breaking out of existing Chinese communities. The third generation arrived between 1972 and the mid-1980s and was comprised in large part of students, who were allowed to go to Japan as diplomatic relations improved and Chinese exit policies loosened.¹³

Chinese immigrants of the present-day, fourth generation are generally better educated, more highly-skilled, and more proficient in Japanese than those of previous generations – and than their Chinese counterparts in other countries. One representative of a headhunting firm argues that his engineers “are not cheap Chinese labor. ... They are workers who are just as skilled as our Japanese engineers and actually offer added value because of their Chinese backgrounds.”¹⁴ Thus, these “new” Chinese often achieve better integration into Japanese society and better paying jobs than ever before. With wages significantly higher than in China, migrants believe that they “can live a modern Chinese dream in Japan.”¹⁵ The focus of this paper is on this group of Chinese.

Young Chinese migrants of this generation usually begin language study in China and then go to Japan for language and general study, often supported by Japanese government scholarships. As of the year 2006, there were 89,400 Chinese students in Japan, representing two-thirds of all foreign students.¹⁶ While enrolled, Chinese often work part-time in convenience stores, bars, and restaurants, and begin the search for full-time employment, often with Japanese companies that do business with China. Most

¹⁰ By the end of 2007, Chinese comprised 28.2% of the registered foreign population, surpassing Koreans for the first time. 华人成日本最大外来族群 (Chinese Become Largest Foreign Population in Japan) <<http://www.chubun.com/modules/article/view.article.php/c120/75870>>.

¹¹ Government of Japan, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, “Section 2 Utilization of excellent overseas human resources – international movements in the labor force,” p. 222 <www.meti.go.jp/english/report/downloadfiles/gIT0332e.pdf>.

¹² Relations were normalized with the Sino-Japanese Joint Statement.

¹³ Wang Guopei (王國培), 在日本的新生代華人生存調查 (“Investigation of the New Generation of Chinese in Japan”), 6 May 2008 <http://big5.news365.com.cn:82/gate/big5/www.news365.com.cn/jj/200805/t20080506_1859208.htm>.

¹⁴ Hannah Beech, “Chinese Immigrants Chase the Japanese Dream,” *Time Magazine* 6 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1691615-3,00.html>>.

¹⁵ Words of Wu Tongtong, a 27-year old software consultant from the Chinese city of Shenyang. Beech, p.1.

¹⁶ 知识创造成就 在日华人不再靠“三把刀”打天下 (“Knowledge Creates Success: Chinese Immigrants in Japan No Longer Rely on Low-Wage Labor”), 8 Aug. 2006 <http://news.xinhuanet.com/overseas/2006-08/08/content_4934968.htm>

Chinese working in Japan have studied at Japanese universities. In 2006, a record 6,000 Chinese students found employment in Japan, 72.5% of all foreign students making the transition to the Japanese labor force.¹⁷

Many Chinese also come to Japan directly for work. One avenue is through Japan's Technical Internship Program; in 2005, 26,606 of the 32,394 participants were Chinese. Another is through private recruiting agencies such as Meitic, which runs half-year training programs in five mainland cities for Chinese engineers.¹⁸ Between 2005 and the end of 2007, Meitec placed 156 Chinese in Japan – and only one elected to return home. Additionally, the number of talented Chinese employed directly by Japanese companies has surged – a record 4,853 came to Japan as intra-company transferees in 2006, an 80.3% increase from the previous year. In 2006, the number of Chinese employed in Japan (full and part-time) surpassed 100,000 for the first time.¹⁹

Table 1

Alien Registrations of Chinese Nationals by Status of Residence, 2006					
Total	560741	Engineer	17634	Dependent	39478
Professor	2507	Specialist in Humanities/Intl. Services	21883	Designated Activities	68531
Artist	128	Intra-company Transferee	4147	Permanent Resident	117329
Religious Activities	103	Entertainer	2153	Spouse/Child of Japan. National	55860
Journalist	12	Skilled Labor	9807	Japanese National	4301
Investor/Business Manager	1553	Cultural Activities	1148	Long Term Resident	33305
Legal/Accounting Services	7	Temporary Visitor	9026	Special Permanent Resident	3086
Medical Services	64	College Student	88074	Without Acquiring Status of Res.	3219
Researcher	951	Pre-college Student	21681	Temporary Refuge	0
Instructor	109	Trainee	52901	Others	1744

Source: Ministry of Justice²⁰

IV. Will the Chinese Stay?

Chinese immigrants are flocking to Japan and contributing to the economy - but is this trend sustainable? As Japan continues to age, will enough Chinese live and work in Japan to have a significant impact on the demographic problem? In 2005, 40% of Chinese students surveyed expressed a desire to go back after studying in Japan.²¹ Such sentiment is due in part to the pull of China's high-potential economy, but might also be a result of discouraging factors in Japan.

While most Chinese who come to Japan do so for economic reasons, some find that work life in Japan is far from perfect. Chinese, notably those who are in the Japanese

¹⁷ Yang LiJun (杨立群), 每个中国人都是“民间大使” (“Every Chinese is an Ambassador for the People”), 7 May 2008 <<http://duan.jp/news/20080507.htm>>; “Knowledge Creates Success...”

¹⁸ <<http://www.meitec.co.jp/e/index.htm>>

¹⁹ 永居傾向高于歸化 逾七十萬在日華人呈現新特點 (More become Permanent Residents than Naturalized Citizens – And other Notable Points of the 700,000 Chinese in Japan) 中國僑網 (Overseas Chinese Net) 9-6-2007 <http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/overseas/2007-09/06/content_6673301.htm>; 美《時代》聚焦在日本的中國新移民 稱其中日橋梁 (New Chinese Immigrants in Japan Bridging the Two Countries) 12-08-2007, 東方早報 (Eastern Morning Daily) <http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/overseas/2007-12/08/content_7218938.htm>

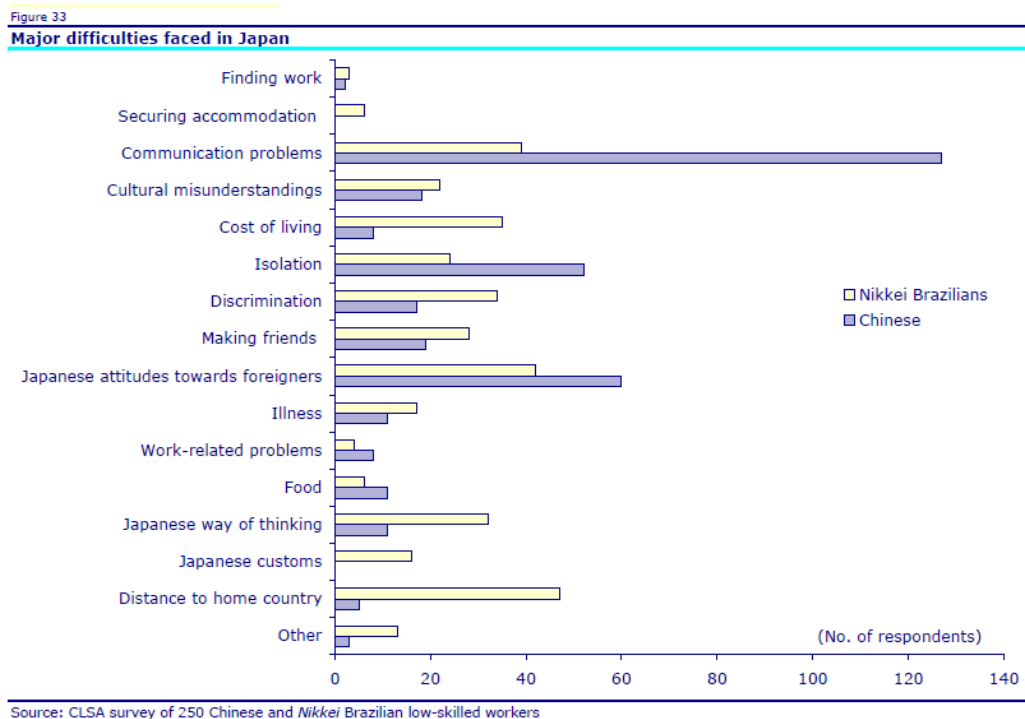
²⁰ Japan Ministry of Justice, “Immigration Control 2007,” data section <<http://www.moj.go.jp/NYUKAN/nyukan68-5.pdf>>, p. 117.

²¹ 难被当地社会接受 在日华人纷纷选择回国 (Lack of Social Acceptance Drives Chinese Immigrants Back to China) 环球时报 (Global Times Newspaper) – No Author: 3-35-2005 <http://news.xinhuanet.com/overseas/2005-03/25/content_2741492.htm>

government's "trainee" program, sometimes receive far less pay than their Japanese colleagues for the same amount of work.²² Nikkeijin (immigrants to Japan of Japanese descent) are likely to earn more money than their Chinese counterparts.²³ Chinese are discouraged by the lack of promotions and managerial responsibility. Many are hourly employees without health insurance. Some endure poor work conditions – In 2006, there were 4,639 reported cases of worker-rights violations in the practical-training program.²⁴

Chinese also face difficulty in the social arena. In a 2006 survey, Chinese workers identified "Japanese attitude toward foreigners" as one of the greatest challenges they faced in Japan, second only to communication problems.²⁵ The media and government have occasionally played up the Chinese threat, private establishments have posted notices barring Chinese from entry, and the public education system is not sufficiently equipped to meet the language needs of Chinese immigrant children and other foreign children.²⁶

Table 2



Source: CLSA²⁷

²² Chris Hogg, "Japan Scheme Abuses Foreign Workers," BBC News 3 October 2007
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7014960.stm>>

²³ Takenoshita, Hirohisa. "The Differential Incorporation into Japanese Labor Market: A Comparative Study of Japanese Brazilians and Professional Chinese Migrants."
<http://www.ipss.go.jp/webj-ad/WebJournal.files/population/2006_3/takenoshita.pdf>

²⁴ Beech, p. N.B. Most participants in this work program are Chinese.

²⁵ Jessie Wilson, "Reluctant Hosts," *CLSA Quarterly*, Feb. 2007
<http://www.clsa.com/quarterly/report.cfm?pdf=CLSA_Quarterly_20070226_i.pdf> p. 95.

²⁶ Sign prohibiting Chinese from entry: Debito, Arudou. "The Rogues' Gallery." 14 Nov. 2007. 7 Aug. 2008
<<http://www.debito.org/roguesgallery.html#koshigaya>>.

²⁷ "Reluctant Hosts," p. 95. N.B. Note that this survey draws from a rather small sample of respondents.

Despite these challenges, Chinese have found success: managing Japanese branches of Chinese companies, starting their own businesses, advancing in IT and other advanced fields, and making a living in blue collar positions. Some Chinese obtain permanent residency or naturalize, and are thus able to navigate the job market on their terms. For social support, there are gatherings such as dance parties where Chinese is spoken and Chinese culture celebrated.²⁸

One academic notes that “Despite the economic downturns in Japan and the booms in China, the eventful diplomatic relationship between the two countries and changing immigration control policies in Japan, the Chinese population has been growing steadily since mid-1980s, showing no sign of slowing down.”²⁹

In addition to the appeal of higher salaries in Japan, this increase in Chinese immigration might also be due to Japanese companies eager to hire Chinese in order to access the overseas market. Furthermore, some Chinese women seem have an easier time breaking through the glass ceiling than their female Japanese counterparts, encouraging workforce participation.³⁰

Other Chinese remain in Japan because they feel their children – 40% of whom are born on Japanese soil – would not be able to adjust to life in China.³¹ Many parents nonetheless insist that their children learn Chinese – there are five full-time schools for Chinese speakers in Japan, and children also learn at home or with private instructors.³² Some children return to China for high school, but most of them subsequently return to Japan for university and employment.

V. Will Japan Accept More Chinese Immigrants?

Although many observers argue that Japan needs more foreign workers such as skilled Chinese, will Japanese people and institutions accept increased immigration, particularly from China? In a recent Japanese government poll, two-thirds of respondents held negative views towards China.³³ Some Japanese view Chinese as “criminals intent on wreaking havoc on Japanese society.”³⁴ While one author declares that the violent crime rate for Chinese is consistent with other foreign populations in Japan, National Police Academy statistics show that in 2007 Chinese, Taiwanese and Hong Kong visitors accounted for a disproportionate 38% of arrests for serious crimes, and 39% of arrests for larceny offences.³⁵ Illegal immigration is also an issue; the MOJ recently estimated there

²⁸ Gracia Liu-Farrer, “Educationally Channeled International Labor Migration: Post-1978 Student Mobility From China to Japan ” Ph.D. dissertation, June 2007 p. 72.

²⁹ Liu-Farrer, pp. 49,50.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 249.

³¹ 日本华人少女考私立中学的一天 (“A Chinese Girl Attends the Entrance Exam for a Private Japanese Middle School”) <<http://www.chinaqw.com.cn/hqhr/hrdt/200802/14/106310.shtml>>.

³² Huang Wenwei, 华童教育任重道远 (“Education of Children of Chinese Immigrants in Japan”) <<http://www.jnocnews.jp/news/show.aspx?id=11517>>.

³³ Beech, p. 3.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 3.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 3; Ed. National Police Academy, Alumni Association for National Police Academy, “Crimes in Japan in 2007,” p. 84, 85 <<http://www.npa.go.jp/english/seisaku5/20081008.pdf>> <<http://www.npa.go.jp/english/seisaku5/20081008.pdf>> N.B, In 2004, Chinese were presumed to have committed 8,673 of 24,437 crimes committed by foreigners, and accounted for 4,620 of 10,543 of all foreigners arrested. Tezuka, p. 64 <http://www.jil.go.jp/english/documents/JLR08_tezuka.pdf>

are 27,698 illegal Chinese living in Japan, the third-largest group of illegals in the country.³⁶

Amid the brutal economic downturn, Japanese companies are cutting payrolls, leading to anger and unease among employees. Against such a backdrop, resentment against the hiring of foreigners has been strong.

Furthermore, some politicians argue that immigrants are not an ideal solution to the demographic problem – Immigrants also age, they consume resources, and there is no guarantee they will do productive work. Alternative solutions put forward include increasing social security taxes and delaying retirements.

However, there are signs that the government might be willing to countenance increased immigration. Most notable is the proposal put forward by members of the Liberal Democratic Party for 10 million foreigners by the year 2050.³⁷ Further examples include a Justice Ministry report published in 2005 that encouraged the consideration of welcoming unskilled workers; a separate government proposal for an “open country policy” under which Japan would create a business environment that would attract highly skilled workers; and admissions by prominent nationalists that Japan needs a sensible immigration policy.³⁸

VI. Future Prospects

Chinese immigrants are playing an increasingly important role in the Japanese economy. Chinese workers are not only filling dangerous, dirty, and demanding positions – they are also entering advanced fields, working as managers, and helping Japanese companies tap the Chinese economy.

The recent surge in Chinese immigration has been the result of inherent supply and demand – growing numbers of Chinese willing and able to go to Japan to work, and an increased appetite on the part of Japanese companies for educated yet cost-efficient workers who can operate in the Japanese cultural and linguistic environment. It is likely that this natural trend of increased Chinese immigration will continue for the foreseeable future, albeit to a relatively subdued degree amid the recession.

However, if Japan is serious about using immigration to counter its demographic problem, it should take measures to ensure sufficient supply of highly-skilled Chinese immigrants in the long-run.

First, there must be momentum in the political arena – The eventual debate over the LDP's proposal for 10 million foreigners by 2050 will indicate how prepared the establishment is for change. Second, immigration law and procedure must be reformed to allow increased numbers and faster processing. Third, government and companies should improve working conditions for Chinese and other immigrants – both through enforcement of existing and new labor laws, and through internal corporate reviews of foreign employee treatment. Fourth, the Japanese government should work on improving education for Chinese children and adults, in order to maximize the contribution of these current and future workers (and to attract and retain them). Fifth, government and

³⁶ <http://www.moj.go.jp/NYUKAN/nyukan68-3.pdf>, p. 31. Estimate as of January 2007.

³⁷ Ito, “Let 10% of Japan be foreigners: Nakagawa.”

³⁸ The body making the open country suggestion was the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy. “Japan should welcome skilled foreign workers – panel,” Reuters, 10 June 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/companyNewsAndPR/idUST28006320080610>; Wilson, p. 92.

industry bodies might cooperate on additional programs that bring skilled Chinese workers to Japan.

It is unlikely that all these suggestions would be adopted and successfully implemented in the near future. Public opinion, political and fiscal considerations, bureaucratic inertia and the current economic turmoil conspire against rapid immigration reform. Regardless, the phenomenon of increased Chinese immigration is already a reality. And, as the demographic crisis begins to manifest itself more painfully, Japan might decide that many more foreign workers – perhaps Chinese in particular – are essential to future economic prosperity.

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