

Excerpts from Sakanaka Hidenori, “The Future of Japan’s Immigration Policy: A Battle Diary,” *Japan Focus*, <http://www.japanfocus.org/products/details/2396> [an abridged translation by Andrew J. I. Taylor based on the last chapter of Sakanaka Hidenori’s *Immigration Battle Diary* (Nyukan Senki), Kodansha, 2005]

The Future of Japan's Immigration Policy

Japan's population, which peaked at 128 million in 2004, is falling. If current trends continue, it will drop below 90 million within 50 years and fall by two-thirds to 40 million within 100 years. As Japan's population falls, many people say the country's future is bleak. The general mood is pessimistic. Dire predictions include a massive decline in economic growth. I think it is unwise to spark fear with such predictions. Yet if current trends continue, Japan will inevitably witness an unprecedented population decline. What lies ahead? Radical change is required. The Japanese people must not shirk from addressing this national issue...

A fork in the road

We can examine how Japan could address population decline by considering the following two extreme options. The Small Option is to allow the population to decline. The Big Option is to compensate for the impending population decrease by accepting immigrants, maintaining Japan's current position as an economic powerhouse. The Small Option would maintain the status quo. The Big Option would increase Japan's ethnic minority population. Whichever option is chosen, Japanese citizens will have to overcome difficult obstacles.

The Small Option

The Small Option would aim to accept the natural population decline and allow the development of a more laid-back society of perhaps 80 million people. An essential part of this scenario is the use of strict policies to limit immigration into Japan. However, if the population continues to fall, there is a high chance of economic depression and social stagnation. Choosing this option requires an awareness of these possible outcomes.

Under this scenario, native Japanese people would continue to play all the major roles involved in running the economy and society. Immigration controls would be tightened. The government could adopt immigration policies that basically barred entry to foreign laborers and other immigrants. The feasibility of The Small Option depends on whether the number of people from other countries seeking to work in Japan can be precisely controlled. As the population of the developing world rises and the desire of developing world workers to live and work in the developed world grows steadily stronger, Japan will need immigration controls strong enough to withstand the pressure of these migratory forces. Starting with China, many of Japan's neighbors have huge populations and outward migratory pressure. Japan will not be able to prevent a mass population influx without building stronger walls around its borders.

Citizens living in a society with a continually shrinking population will not only have to change their lifestyles but will also have to take on greater responsibility. They will have to take an outlook on life molded by an expanding society and modify it to fit a contracting one. They will need to move from a lifestyle that celebrates richness to one that celebrates simplicity. As the country tries to maintain its social welfare system, they will have to bear higher tax levels and accept lower levels of pension and other benefits...

The Big Option

The Big Option, on the other hand, would aim to compensate for the natural decline in the Japanese population through a mass influx of immigrants, supporting a "dynamic Japan" that maintained economic growth. Japan would keep its position as a leading global economy and maintain its current standard of living. The success of the policy would depend on how far Japan could develop an openness towards the new arrivals. If this path is chosen, immigrants would play important roles in Japan's economy and society. The Japanese people's tendency to embrace growth and fundamentals of the economy would not change.

To implement The Big Option, the country would need to accept over 20 million immigrants during the next 50 years. Before welcoming such an unprecedented influx, Japan would need to build a national consensus that new arrivals should be welcomed as "friends" and contributors to Japanese society. Japan would have to transform itself into a land of opportunity, building an open, fair society which guaranteed equal opportunity, judged people on their merits, and allowed everyone to improve their social status regardless of origin or ethnicity.

Japan's criteria for accepting new arrivals and its immigration procedures would have to be open, transparent and fair if immigration authorities were to appropriately process a vast number of immigration applications. A major issue would be how to define acceptance criteria. The state's basic attitude to the treatment of foreigners would also be called into question. Under Japan's current policies, which generally view foreigners as a target for control and regulation, Japan will not be able to make the leap and become a tolerant multiethnic society.

The government would have to emphasize deeper integration between Japanese and other nationalities. It would have to transform governmental administration to better account for immigrant needs and guarantee immigrants and ethnic minorities the same rights as native Japanese. The smooth integration of newcomers into society should be placed at the centre of government policy, with a particular emphasis on Japanese language education and employment assistance. The government would also have to ease the passage to citizenship.

Of course, if Japan were to become a multiethnic society, problems resulting from differences in ethnicity, culture and religion would be unavoidable. The government would have to mediate the conflicting interests of different groups and avoid provoking interethnic conflict. It would also take on the heavy responsibility of establishing principles to promote social integration, binding the various ethnic groups together as Japanese citizens. To responsibly tackle these serious issues, the state would need to establish a national Immigration Agency with a mandate to plan and implement comprehensive policies for the treatment of immigrants, promote the social integration of ethnic minorities, and monitor and prevent discrimination.

We should note that even if Japan managed to resolve its immediate problem of population decline through the acceptance of immigrants, Japan would, in the not-too-distant future, come up against various obstacles including the social burden of large-scale migration, and environmental and energy problems...

Opening the Gates

Recently many Japanese industrialists have begun to advocate the acceptance of large numbers of overseas immigrants to address labor shortfalls, consumer market shrinkage and pension funding problems that population decline will bring. But can the Japanese people, who have little experience of living together with those of different ethnicity, welcome large numbers of immigrants without adequate

mental and physical preparation?

If current attitudes remain unchanged, the public may be unable to deal with a massive increase in immigration, and hostility may erupt. Labor market competition and cultural friction could provoke violence between native Japanese and immigrants, leading to public calls for immigrant repatriation. Such developments would leave deep-seated resentment. Regional conflicts across the world show us that the road to peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic groups is not easy. Mutual understanding and integration can only be achieved with great effort.

The perceptions of the majority are important here. Citizens without pride in their own ethnic group and culture cannot be tolerant towards other ethnic groups, nor can they win their respect. If native Japanese are to build good relationships with people from other countries, they must have an awareness and sense of pride in themselves. They will also have to treat other ethnic groups, including other Asians, as equals.

Given Japan's history as an island populated by people with a shared culture and common outlook, developing close personal relationships with people of different cultures will not be easy. As a first step, Japanese society will need to move away from valuing homogeneity and wariness of individualism and begin respecting and embracing individual differences. Japan will have to implement nationwide educational activities in homes, schools and workplaces to achieve a balanced view of immigrants.

Looking at the way corporations employ foreign workers, for example, it is clear that new arrivals are not granted the same treatment as native Japanese and little attempt is made to evaluate and leverage their talents and sensibilities. The majority of immigrant workers are simply being used as a source of cheap labor. Talented personnel will steer well clear of companies with such discriminatory structures, preventing Japanese corporations from recruiting international talent. To attract overseas personnel, Japan must develop a corporate culture that confers status and income based on ability, irrespective of nationality or ethnicity. Perhaps in such a climate, innovative leaders in the mold of Sakamoto Ryoma (1836-1867: former merchant samurai and later political visionary who helped lead the fight against feudal Japan after the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry's black ships) may emerge from among the native Japanese or immigrant population, leading to the creative destruction of Japan's rigid social structures and the opportunity for a renewal of Japan's political, economic and cultural life.

A society based on coexistence?

There are approximately 2 million people without Japanese citizenship living in Japan. Since around 450,000 of this total are Special Permanent Residents with North Korean or South Korean citizenship, the number of actual immigrants is around 1.55 million or just over 1% of the total population. As such, Japan may appear insular.

However, Japanese immigration laws allow a wide range of foreign workers, particularly skilled workers, to enter the country. The total number of long-term foreign residents has risen significantly from 1.08 million in 1992 to 2.01 million in 2005. But why doesn't it feel as if this significant increase in foreign residents of Japan has brought about increased interaction and deeper understanding between native Japanese and other nationalities?

We do not often see Japanese people praising the work of foreign residents and warmly welcoming them as friends and colleagues. It is rare to hear of a foreign resident of Japan who has achieved notable successes or a good social reputation. It is far more common to hear of problems - problems adjusting to society, problems with children's education, problems of discriminatory treatment, housing problems, social insurance problems - the list goes on and on.

There are clearly many deficiencies with the system Japan has in place for accepting immigrants. But Japanese society today is not simply intolerant of people specifically because they come from overseas. The problem goes deeper. I think its roots are in the increasing number of Japanese people who have decided to ignore those around them. Resolving these issues rests on the extent to which we can increase the number of conscientious, open-minded Japanese who show consideration for those in weak positions.

The native Japanese have lived as a single ethnic group for nearly 1000 years and it will be a difficult task for them to build friendly relationships with other ethnic groups. There will likely be many who would prefer to deal only with other Japanese people rather than foreigners with different customs and ideas. From an emotional point of view, I would also prefer to choose The Small Option, with people of Japanese ethnicity in the overwhelming majority.

However, stopping the tide of globalization is impossible. Japanese people can no longer ensconce themselves in a "Japanese only world". Regardless of personal preference, it will be necessary to live together with immigrants in some capacity. Native Japanese will have to develop an ethnic identity and recognize that all ethnic groups are equal in order to form close personal relationships with immigrant groups. How many people in Japan currently have both a sense of their own ethnicity and a spirit of tolerance? How much public will is there to create a multiethnic society?

As Japan's population declines, the number of foreign residents will surely increase year by year. If such growth is unplanned, localities with a large immigrant population may experience interracial friction and conflict leading to discrimination, prejudice, alienation and crime. Such serious problems may start to occur frequently. But if the immigration issue is simply ignored, skilled overseas workers will not look towards Japan.

Japan is by no means a closed society in the usual sense of the word. Quite the contrary, Japanese society has a wealth of diversity and a history of proactively assimilating foreign culture. From a religious perspective, Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity all exist together peacefully. Japanese people already have an ingrained tendency to accept different values and practices. As such, Japan already has a fertile soil for the growth of peaceful coexistence and harmony.

If Japanese society changed course and began to emphasize respect for diversity, then surely numerous people would start to develop a more welcoming attitude. If that could be achieved, the establishment of a Japanese-style multi-ethnic society, rooted in Japan's history and social climate, might not be far off.