

Chapter 9

Immigration



The rapid increase in the number of immigrants to Japan during the Heisei era has raised anxieties among Japanese about the future of their country, national identity, and how to manage the influx. There is a muted public discourse about this politically sensitive subject against the backdrop of a rapidly aging society and a declining workforce tasked with supporting soaring outlays for retirees' pensions and medical care. This problem is looming as the workforce is projected to decline from about 65 million in 2009 to 55 million in 2030.

There are thus pragmatic reasons for accommodating more immigrants on more favorable terms battling with deep-seated concerns about the implications of a larger non-Japanese population. As in other countries grappling with immigration, xenophobia and prejudice are shaping the debate and complicating policy deliberations. In the early twenty-first century, immigrants in Japan, as elsewhere, are feeling less welcome even as their presence has become more indispensable. Precisely because immigration is such a controversial issue, the government has tackled reform in an *ad hoc*, piecemeal fashion. Several proposals for comprehensive reforms have been tabled and then shelved. Instead, by tinkering at the margins, and not promoting bold, headline-grabbing proposals that would become easy political targets, policy-makers are facilitating incremental increases in immigration. This judicious, step-by-step approach favored by the bureaucracy makes sense in terms of prevailing political realities and public attitudes opposed to immigration, but the absence of a comprehensive approach is also exacting a toll on the interests of immigrants and Japanese society. In short, the rights of immigrants are not well protected and the scale of immigration is too small and slow to meet the needs of the nation.

Japan has relatively few non-Japanese residents, but the numbers in Japan doubled between 1990 and 2008 from 1.1 million to 2.2 million, and

they constitute 1.74 percent of the population. While this surge in the non-Japanese population has drawn some shrill commentary in Japan, the percentage remains quite low compared to the UK (5.8 percent), Germany (8.2 percent), and Spain (10.3 percent). The emergence of Japan as a major global economy, labor shortages, and the development of transnational networks (including brokers) all facilitated a surge in foreign migrant workers arriving in Japan from the late 1980s. This rapid increase is largely in urban areas and has been most marked among Chinese and Brazilian immigrants. In the non-Japanese community, there are some 590,000 Japan-born ethnic Koreans, 655,000 Chinese, and 312,000 *nikkeijin* (overseas-born ethnic Japanese from South America). In addition, the number of visa overstayers, mostly from other Asian countries such as Korea, China, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, grew from 100,000 in 1990 to nearly 200,000 in 1993, prompting a government crackdown following revisions to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act in 2004. The Ministry of Justice reported 150,000 migrants remaining in Japan beyond the validity of their visas as of 2008.

Heisei era migrants have been recruited because of labor shortages, including unskilled and skilled workers. Their presence is not entirely welcome despite their crucial contributions. It is hard to imagine Japan functioning without its foreign workers, but that doesn't mean this reality is widely acknowledged or appreciated. In the early 1990s there were once 33,000 Iranians in Japan, mostly engaged as construction workers, until most were abruptly sent home in 1992 after the government decided to revoke a visa exemption agreement. The same fate awaited the disposable foreign workers who helped build the facilities for the 1998 Nagano Olympics.

Japan is certainly not as diverse as Europe and the US, but it has become more diverse and in some respects is a multi-ethnic society in denial. Japan as a mono-ethnic, homogeneous nation persists in the collective imagination even if there are jarring signs of change and stealthy transformation. It is telling that the number of international marriages is on the rise, accounting for 6.5 percent of the total in 2006, and one out of 30 babies born in Japan has at least one foreign parent.

Immigration is a touchy issue and a divisive topic that eludes consensus. Current debate about labor migration to Japan focuses on what kind of workers should be allowed in – i.e. skilled workers only or also unskilled workers, how many and from where, and how long they should be allowed to stay and under what conditions.¹ This discourse is also shaped by

widespread perceptions that foreigners often resort to crime, although national crime statistics show that in fact foreigners do not commit crimes disproportionate to their numbers and most of their offenses involve visa violations.

Advocates of opening the doors point to Japan's population decline, impending labor shortages, and the need for more taxpayers to keep the national medical and pension schemes solvent. Opponents insist on preserving the current degree of homogeneity and warn against the pitfalls of accommodating large resident foreign communities. These are not only crazed nativists trying to haul up the drawbridges; there is concern that until Japan can put in place laws and regulations that protect the human rights of migrant workers, it should not extend them the welcome mat. The difficult experience of ethnic Koreans born and raised in Japan, commonly known as the *zainichi*, is instructive.

Zainichi

The *zainichi* community of long-term ethnic Korean permanent residents in Japan constitutes the nation's largest minority, one that has not fared that well. The Koreans came to Japan during the wartime years, 1931–45, looking for work or on a coerced basis. With the dissolution of the Japanese empire in 1945 they were stripped of Japanese nationality, but many stayed and raised families here while carrying either South or North Korean passports. Their children and grandchildren may have attended Korean schools in Japan (many don't), but they are fluent in Japanese, culturally socialized, and virtually indistinguishable from Japanese. However, even such assimilated Japan-born "foreigners" face discrimination and tend to have lower levels of educational attainment and income. Facing discrimination in Japanese firms, many have established their own businesses while others have become celebrities, although often hiding their ethnic background. In addition, many *yakuza* are recruited from the *zainichi* community, reflecting the limited opportunities open to them.

As of 2008, the Immigration Bureau reports that there were 589,239 registered Korean residents in Japan, down from a peak of 688,144 in 1992. This figure does not include the 284,840 Koreans who have opted to become naturalized Japanese citizens. There are nearly 60 Korean schools across Japan, once subsidized by Pyongyang, but now mostly funded through public subsidies and Chongryon, a pro-North-Korean organization in

Japan. Changes in Japanese tax laws, harassment targeting students wearing the distinctive uniforms, and the decision by many *zainichi* to send their children to public schools are creating financial difficulties for many of these schools and their future appears bleak. About 65 percent of *zainichi* are affiliated with Mindan, the pro-South-Korean organization in Japan. Divided ideologically, the two organizations are united in their zeal to sustain a strong sense of Korean identity and oppose assimilation and naturalization.

Koreans in Japan have fragmented identities, living on the margins in Japan and viewed as foreigners in Korea. In recent years there has been an increase in the numbers of Koreans becoming naturalized citizens, some 10,000 a year, due to the advantages this confers, the barriers it lowers, and the inescapable reality for some of having a less resolutely Korean identity rooted in the nation state; identity as a Korean is not, for increasing numbers of young *zainichi*, a matter of passports. There are some 8,000 marriages annually between *zainichi* and Japanese (6,000 with Japanese men and 2,000 with Japanese women); their children automatically gain Japanese citizenship under a 1985 law. Most naturalization occurs at time of marriage or employment, suggesting it is mostly a pragmatic decision, but the implications for the *zainichi* community are ominous as younger generations develop more flexible identity strategies that facilitate their assimilation.

Another reason for *zainichi* to naturalize is because Japan has become decidedly less hospitable to ethnic Koreans despite the incredible boom in Korean popular culture in Japan that was sparked by the joint hosting of the World Cup soccer tournament in 2002 and a massively popular Korean television drama, "Winter Sonata," aired in Japan. This anti-Korean backlash is due to a series of missile tests by North Korea, its nuclear weapons program, and frenzied media coverage of Japanese nationals' abductions by North Korean agents. This has generated a virulent anti-North-Korean groundswell, whipped up by politicians and the media, one that generates pressure on *zainichi* to blend in.

Although there is greater momentum towards naturalization and assimilation, as one *zainichi* found out, assimilation is in the eye of the beholder. In 2005 the 15-justice Grand Bench of the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) regulations that exclude foreigners from management-level positions in the civil service, overturning a 1998 high court ruling. The top court upheld the TMG's decision to bar a second-generation *zainichi* from taking an exam that would have

qualified her for promotion to a public sector management position. At the time, Chong Hyang Gyun was a public health nurse and there was no possibility that she would be promoted to a national security-sensitive position, but 13 of the justices argued it is reasonable to exclude non-Japanese entirely from the exercise of public authority. The two dissenting justices argued that the ban from all civil service managerial positions based on nationality was not rational.

In essence the TMG is employing *zainichi*, but on the condition they don't expect equal treatment or merit-based promotions. The senior civil service is, like some dodgy nightclubs and baths, Japanese only.² The plaintiff, whose mother is Japanese, had argued that this restriction contravenes the constitutional guarantees of equality and freedom of individuals to choose their occupation, but the justices ruled otherwise. *Zainichi* are accorded "special permanent resident" status in recognition of their anomalous circumstances as people born in Japan, but not accorded citizenship unless they choose naturalization. Like other foreigners, *zainichi* are required to carry a foreigner's identification card. The court ruled that TMG is within its rights to bar non-citizens from the upper echelons of the civil service, but from a public relations perspective it did not help that Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara, a conservative nationalist, has made discriminatory and inflammatory remarks about *zainichi*. Many advocates say that loosening immigration restriction is a matter of time as Japan slowly makes a pragmatic accommodation to the growing need for more workers, but the Supreme Court has set a precedent allowing significant restrictions.

Nikkeijin

In 2009, while many *nikkeijin* were losing their jobs and in some cases their housing due to the economic crisis, the Japanese government unveiled a controversial initiative that entailed the government paying each unemployed *nikkeijin* worker a one-time JPY300,000 payment to cover airfare, and JPY200,000 for each dependent, to return home.³ Initially the government stipulated that anyone accepting the exit bonus would not be able to return to Japan and retain the special working visa status given to *nikkeijin*, rendering it a one-way ticket home. Spain, grappling with even more severe unemployment problems, adopted a similar initiative in 2009, paying unemployment benefits in a lump sum to departees, but exiting migrants

always had the option of returning, circumstances permitting, after three years. In the face of widespread denunciation of its plan within Japan and the international media, the Japanese government backtracked, explaining that after three years the *nikkeijin* would be allowed to return. However, since they will have to reapply for the long-term resident visa that has allowed them to work without restriction, it remains to be seen how this policy will work in practice. There are signs that the government will make re-entry tougher for them.

Given bleak job prospects for *nikkeijin* in Japan, mostly unskilled workers, many of whom lack sufficient language skills to enter job training programs or apply for other jobs, the government defended its policy as one designed to promote their welfare while critics asserted that Japan is discarding these unskilled workers because they are no longer needed and have never fit in. Along with the exit bonuses the government also announced language training programs for up to 5,000 *nikkeijin* aimed at facilitating assimilation for those who remain, a belated but inadequate recognition that the government failed the migrants by its indifference, not doing anything to facilitate their social integration since they began arriving in 1990. Unlike in Germany where the government offers immigrants 900 hours of subsidized language and social integration training, the Japanese government has not offered similar programs for the *nikkeijin*, or any other foreigners for that matter. This pennywise approach based on the illusory advantages of shared ancestry tilted the odds against the *nikkeijin* fitting in and becoming accepted. The absence of language skills has kept many *nikkeijin* on the margins of society and trapped them into low-end assembly jobs with few opportunities for training or advancement.

As of 2009, Brazilians account for 317,000 of the estimated 370,000 *nikkeijin* residing in Japan, with Peruvians constituting the next largest group.⁴ Most work in manufacturing, frequently in car parts production. This made *nikkeijin* vulnerable to the massive layoffs in the manufacturing sector during 2008–9, especially as the hard-hit automobile industry slashed orders from the subcontractors where many *nikkeijin* were employed. Suddenly many were out of work, local Brazilian schools and other services closed, and unlike in recent downturns, few expected a rebound soon enough to make waiting it out an option. For those fortunate enough to receive unemployment insurance, benefits expire within a year. As a result, even before the government announced its exit bonus plan, many laid-off workers were leaving, sometimes with support from their embassy.

Japan has long maintained a strict immigration policy barring unskilled labor, but in 1990, facing labor shortages, the government revised the immigration law and established a side door that maintained the ban in principle while enabling unskilled overseas ethnic Japanese workers to obtain work visas on the strength of their ancestral blood ties.⁵ The law allowed anyone whose parent or grandparent was a Japanese citizen to apply for a long-term resident visa. This visa allowed them to stay for three years and engage in any work, including unskilled jobs, and could be renewed indefinitely provided they kept a clean record. This *nikkeijin* exception was based on what is now regarded as an erroneous assumption that Japanese blood would trump Latin American culture. The government knew companies needed more workers doing undesirable jobs Japanese avoided because of low pay, but also did not want to deal with the problems that they expected from migrant workers. The solution was in the DNA; endowed with Japanese roots, faces and names, *nikkeijin* were seen to have what it takes to fit into a proudly insular society that is closed to outsiders, and would adapt and assimilate seamlessly to working and living in Japan. These high expectations were unrealistic and proved elusive.

Many *nikkeijin* jumped at the opportunity for economic reasons, knowing they could make better wages in Japan. The dramatic influx from 4,000 *nikkeijin* in 1988 to 370,000 two decades on took Japanese small manufacturing towns by surprise. *Nikkeijin* are clustered in 15 towns and cities where local authorities were not well prepared for the new residents, mostly bachelors at the outset, who were seen as temporary guest workers. Local residents also encountered difficulties with their new neighbors and their more exuberant lifestyle. Arriving "home," proud of their heritage, many *nikkeijin* quickly became disillusioned with life in Japan, unable to reconcile their unrealistically high expectations with the realities that awaited them. Dingy towns, cramped living quarters, shabby factories, and a society lacking a sociable zest for good living and fun fueled disappointment. They found the Japanese to be cold, unfriendly, and unresponsive, making the transition all the more difficult.

Many of the *nikkeijin* were employed indirectly through brokers, frequently as contract or temporary workers, and were paid at prevailing hourly wage rates. This meant that in practice the *nikkeijin* were paid less than Japanese counterparts performing the same jobs because they did not receive fringe benefits or bonuses that in many cases are equivalent to five months of wages. Many were also working without medical or unemployment insurance and in some cases brokers received a percentage of their salaries.⁶

Hard as it is, the money is relatively good, so there has been a peripatetic movement back and forth between Brazil and Japan as many migrants work a few years in Japan, return home after a few years with their savings, and then resume their lives as migrant workers. However, more *nikkeijin* began to put down roots in Japan, marrying and raising families and in some cases becoming permanent residents. What initially involved mostly single men morphed into more permanent, family-centered communities with different needs and goals. *Nikkeijin* began staying longer because they had families to take care of and the opportunities in Japan were better than back home. Moreover, due to the prolonged recession, good jobs became scarce and it became more difficult to work overtime and accumulate enough savings to return home. The total number of permanent residents, those foreigners allowed to stay indefinitely, increased 28 percent from 657,605 in 2000 to 911,362 in 2008, while the number of Brazilian permanent residents jumped more than tenfold from 9,062 to 94,400 in the same period. Other *nikkeijin* married Japanese and, as of 2002, 34 percent of Brazilians resident in Japan held a spouse visa.⁷ Children born in Japan automatically get citizenship if one parent is Japanese.

Nikkeijin children present significant challenges to small local school boards because of their lack of language skills, but also because as many as one-quarter do not attend any school at all. The government made no provision for teaching Japanese as a foreign language to *nikkeijin* students, meaning they got lost in class, and because school attendance is not mandatory, many dropped out. As a result they lost their chance to gain the know-how and skills needed to give them social mobility. Government indifference, thus, has created pockets of unemployable young people, a recipe for social problems. Some communities have established Brazilian schools, but tuition is relatively expensive and until 2009 these schools did not receive government assistance or funding. Local school boards with limited resources have also responded as best they could in trying to cater to *nikkeijin* needs, offering supplementary language instruction and tutoring, with some success. The high rate of truancy, however, combined with social marginalization has led to problems of juvenile delinquency, reinforcing negative Japanese stereotypes about foreigners' propensity for crime.

Nikkeijin suffer from fragmented identities that render social integration difficult.⁸ At home they are an admired ethnic group while in Japan they are stigmatized for being more Brazilian than Japanese. Problematically, because the *nikkeijin* appeared to be Japanese, local people and employers had unrealistic expectations that they would act accordingly. But they were

not hardwired to function in Japanese society, and thus many encountered discrimination for not living up to expectations and for acting like the foreigners they were.

Chinese Migrants

Most of the 655,000 Chinese-born people residing in Japan as of 2008 came after the mid-1980s, making them the fastest-growing ethnic community. Between 1990 and 2005, 58,879 Chinese became Japanese citizens, while as of 2008 there were 128,501 Chinese permanent residents, most gaining this status since 2000. Significantly, Chinese are the largest number among foreigners married to Japanese and this trend is increasing. In 2005, over 50,000 Chinese residents in Japan held spouse visas and an additional 35,000 had dependent visas.

Compared to *nikkeijin*, Chinese in Japan tend to have strong language skills and fewer problems functioning in society and in the workplace, but as with other foreigners they do face discrimination. Typically, these migrants start by working at Japanese firms, but leave to start up their own ventures because they find the rules and regimen at Japanese firms oppressive and depressing. In addition, Chinese women confront gender barriers in Japanese companies and so choose other opportunities that don't constrain their careers. Chinese migrants also realize they can't ever really assimilate and don't want to anyway. Instead, they identify and exploit profitable niches as transnational entrepreneurs, tapping into China's economic boom.⁹

Since 2006, China has overtaken the US as Japan's leading trading partner and the China trade has been a major source of growth in the Japanese economy. Bilingual, culturally adept, and armed with contacts on both sides of the East China Sea, Chinese migrants play a key part in building business networks and relationships that are the basis for surging economic ties. They are building bridges in the twenty-first century that help offset the highly contentious disputes over history and territory that have defined and influenced bilateral relations since the late nineteenth century.

More than 80,000 Chinese are studying in Japanese universities, many courtesy of Japanese government scholarships, accounting for some two-thirds of Japan's foreign student population. During the mid-1980s Chinese authorities eased restrictions, making it easier for students to study abroad,

an attractive option given the sad state of Chinese universities at that time. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Nakasone (1982-7) promoted internationalization of Japan by setting a goal of attracting 100,000 foreign students by the end of the twentieth century. To this end, the government relaxed procedures and criteria for student visas in 1984 and established scholarship programs. From 1984 to 2005, more than 250,000 Chinese language and university students came to Japan.

Upon graduation many Chinese start their careers at Japanese companies. This influx of white-collar, highly educated migrant Chinese is slowly prompting a reassessment of xenophobic attitudes towards foreigners, at least within government policy-making circles and among human resource managers if not the public at large. Prejudice against Chinese in Japan, however, remains widespread and the government and media fan concerns about their involvement in crime.¹⁰

Japanese remain dubious about foreigners in general and, in opinion surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006, two-thirds admitted having negative feelings towards China, the highest percentage in two decades and the highest anti-Chinese prejudice in all of Asia.¹¹ Chinese regularly report housing discrimination and are often stopped for identification checks by police. The media has highlighted the role of Chinese gangs in a spate of robberies, advertising promotes locks that "even Chinese can't pick," while high-profile murders committed by Chinese in Japan cast a shadow over the expatriate community.

There are also reports of widespread abuses involving Chinese who come to Japan under the auspices of a 1993 practical training program that initially allowed three-year working stints and now up to five years.¹² Three-quarters of "trainees" come from China. This is essentially a program aimed at providing cheap, unskilled labor to Japanese small and medium companies where there is little training or technology transfer. Nearly 93,000 trainees came in 2006 alone, including 62,000 Chinese, double the number in 1995, but they are not usually acquiring useful technical skills, and they earn extremely low wages in the range of JPY65,000 a month. This means they have little chance of returning home with either the fruits of technology transfer or significant savings. Given that many of these workers take out loans from job brokers at home, the low pay means they can't pay off their debts when they return.

The Japan International Training Cooperation Organization (JITCO), an organization supported by five government ministries, has been criticized for lax supervision and failing to protect trainees from widespread

abuses. The reported abuses included recruiting workers under false premises, forcing them to work excessive hours without overtime pay, withholding pay or underpayment, inflating expenses for room, board, and utilities charged against their wages, seizure of passports, and sexual harassment.

What began as a promising development initiative has become an embarrassment for the government. There have been several lawsuits filed by workers that ensure maximum publicity for what is wrong with JITCO and the foreign trainee program, but it continues to operate while providing *amakudari* positions to retiring bureaucrats.

Foreign Caregivers

Japan faces a serious shortage of nurses and caregivers as the number of elderly requiring nursing care is projected to total 7.8 million in FY2025–6, a 1.7-fold increase from FY2006–7. The MHLW calculates that Japan will need an additional 400,000 to 600,000 caregivers and nurses by 2014.¹³ The government is partially responsible for the shortage having reduced subsidies to elderly care facilities twice since 2003, causing a decline in already low salaries for caregivers. The annual turnover rate for caregivers is more than 20 percent, and some 500,000 Japanese with licenses have given up working in the field.

Japan's *ad hoc* approach to immigration reform is evident in Japan's Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the Philippines and Indonesia. These agreements embody the tinkering at the margins approach to the immigration issue, lacking any long-term vision while neglecting the interests of Japan and the migrant workers. These EPAs include provision for accepting 1,000 nurses and caregivers from each country over a two-year period to work in Japan for three to four years, but also set the bar very high for them to remain working in Japan beyond the trial period. These EPAs represent compromises hammered out between various ministries in Japan and with the partner nations to address Japan's massive staffing shortages for elderly care, but stop short of doing enough to alleviate the problem.

Indonesians began arriving in 2008 and Filipinos in 2009. The Japan International Corporation of Welfare Services is coordinating the program. Japan has agreed to accept up to 400 Indonesian nurses and 600 caregivers in 2008 and 2009 as "candidates" for government certification if they pass

qualifying exams.¹⁴ In the event, only 104 Indonesian nurses and 101 caregivers, about two-thirds women, began work in 2008, reflecting problems of recruiting suitable candidates. Of the male candidates who passed screening tests, 66 were dropped because they could not secure contracts as male nurses are not in high demand in Japan. In addition, there has been lukewarm interest because of concerns that the time and energy involved in becoming a candidate are not worth it given the high probability candidates will not pass qualifying exams and will be forced to return home after a few years. In 2009, the incoming numbers were also well below target because there is a shortage of jobs at hospitals and care facilities amidst the economic crisis.

Indonesian nurses must have two years' experience while caregivers are required to be graduates of institutions of higher learning or nursing school graduates certified by the Indonesian government. Candidates are given six months' Japanese language and vocational training and then work at hospitals and elderly care institutions. They receive the same salaries as Japanese staff and also get additional living assistance. Nurses are allowed to stay three years before taking national examinations, with three chances to pass, while caregivers have four years and only one chance to pass. Those who pass the exams will be given three-year visas and can renew these a maximum of three times. Given that the pass rate of Japanese is only 50 percent on these exams, there are concerns that the Indonesians and Filipinos will not develop the requisite language skills fast enough to pass. It is not encouraging that none of the Indonesian nurses who took the exam in 2009 passed, prompting the government to offer subsidized supplemental language instruction.

After 5 years of difficult negotiations, the initial 2009 target from the Philippines was 200 Filipino nurses and 300 caregivers, but only a total of 358 arrived, apparently reflecting the economic crisis in Japan and fewer than expected contract offers. Filipino caregivers must have graduated from a four-year vocational course (or nursing program) and be certified, while nurses are required to have three years of prior experience. Under the terms of the agreement, Filipinos who pass their licensing exams in Japan will be allowed to remain in Japan to practice their professions on an unlimited basis.

The problem is that this program is designed to fail and offers no immediate relief to the existing acute shortages of nurses and caregivers in Japan and also no long-term solution. Given Japan's rapidly graying population and rising demand for elderly care services, the EPA model suggests the

government does not yet have an appropriate sense of urgency or pragmatism. Sending the nurses and caregivers home if they fail their exams is also a tremendous waste of investment by the employers in the workers, estimated at JPY10 million each over the term of the visas. This is one of the reasons that employers have not extended as many contract offers as had been expected. The program also underutilizes the workers, most of whom are overqualified to perform tasks that are normally the work of hospital orderlies.

Institutions and patients' families remain leery of hiring foreign nurses and caregivers because of concerns about language barriers that might compromise safety and care standards. Clearly, staffing shortages are one of the major risks to patients, and turnover especially in elderly care is very high because of low wages and often unpleasant working conditions. The media has tried to address concerns about maintaining standards by emphasizing that much of what caregiving entails depends on the attitude and kindness of the caregiver, not their aptitude on standardized exams. However, the Japanese Nursing Association and the Association of Certified Caregivers emphasize the threat to standards of service and express concerns that an influx of foreign labor will depress already low wages in this sector. They call on the government to improve working conditions to lower turnover, attract more Japanese applicants, and lure back those who have quit.

There is high demand for Filipino nurses around the world and they express a preference for English-speaking countries; about 18,000 Filipino nurses and caregivers go overseas every year, with the US and Canada as top destinations. NHK broadcast a special about this topic and few of the Filipino participants interviewed expressed a desire to work in Japan.¹⁵ In other countries they are highly sought after and can start work and be earning money immediately, whereas in Japan they have 6 months of language instruction before they start earning wages. In addition, in other countries they are welcome to stay and many prefer Canada because it facilitates naturalization of migrant workers rather than sending them home if they fail difficult certification exams.

Opening the door to foreign nurses and caregivers within the broad framework of an EPA is smart politics. Opposing vested interests are trumped by the ostensibly larger national interests at stake and unable to block labor migration because it is depicted as an unavoidable consequence of negotiations and compromise. Behind the scenes there were pitched bureaucratic battles among relevant ministries ever vigilant about their turf

and prerogatives, but a scaled-down and less than optimum plan survived the process and now the nose of the camel is inside the tent. This is a pilot program and, in light of the highly politicized nature of labor migration, a small step that may help break down barriers and provide the foundation for establishing a program better designed to meet the needs of Japanese for good elderly care and improving conditions for the foreign caregivers. Once such a program starts, and sending and receiving institutions are established, bureaucratic inertia favors its continuation.