



## Preface

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## Open Access

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## Preface

Japan faces population aging and shrinking. It is in particular the workforce that sees a rapid numerical decline. The manifold challenges that arise from this development are well researched, and so are most of their potential countermeasures. One of these, however, seems to be only marginally present in the discourse about Japan's demographic change, if at all: the discourse about international labor migration. De jure, Japan does not allow for larger, systematic influxes of foreign workers. De facto, however, migration does take place through a variety of (mostly legal) channels. The economic impact of international labor migrants is cherished, yet politics and society at first glance still largely ignore their existence. This special issue of *Contemporary Japan* focuses on how Japan copes with population aging and a shrinking workforce in an age of accelerated international migration flows. Questions that are being addressed include the following: What are the reasons behind the prevailing gap between the positioning of political, economic, and societal actors toward international migration to Japan? How does Japan's demographic change impact the nation's migration policy? To what extent does public opinion shape the political developments? How do the migrants themselves experience their life in Japan?

Junichi Akashi presents an elaborate compilation on migration policy proposals and policy reforms in the context of population decline. He analyzes to which degree three of the most notable recent initiatives actually had an impact within this policy field and beyond: the guidelines about permanent residence, the UN third-country resettlement initiative, and bilateral economic partnership agreements with Southeast Asian countries. Akashi concludes that the impact of these reforms so far has been limited. He argues that in fact Japan's immigration policy (*imin seisaku*), a term which itself still requires additional explanation, cannot be understood as a coherent policy, but as a conglomeration of ad-hoc initiatives addressing various single issues. He suggests the reason for this to be found in inter-party and inner-party conflicts within the Liberal Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Japan alike, rather than in the much-researched sectionalism within the bureaucracy.

While Akashi argues that Japan's recent policy initiatives regarding immigration have had little impact so far, Ayako Komine introduces a different per-

spective. She claims that despite the lack of any official immigration policy in Japan, economy and society do in fact experience significant impacts by an increase in international labor migration. In her paper she refers to two cases in point: one being a 25-year-old policy reform, which allowed for easy access to long-term resident status and unlimited work permit to persons of Japanese descent (*nikkeijin*); the other one being the recent points-based immigration system targeting highly skilled transnational human resources. Komine argues that while the Japanese government never explicitly introduced an immigration policy, the actual conditions of migration have become favorable enough for migrants to settle in Japan. While policy change to this day is reactive and incremental, it has in fact brought forward a substantial population of denizens, who are an integral part of Japan's business world and local municipalities. In other words, the realities of daily life have outrun the political framework — the cart has been faster than the horse.

The paper by Ruth Achenbach on highly skilled Chinese women in Japan's labor market presents a call for conducting migration research from a migrants' perspective. In her study, rich in empirical data gathered during multiple fieldwork trips to Japan and China, she explores the life course choices of these women in Japan. Despite facing the twofold structural discrimination of gender and ethnicity on the labor market, Achenbach shows that many of these women manage to build successful careers for themselves. They do so not only by purposively using their transnational networks, but also through implementing strategies of work-family balance commonly unattainable to Japanese women, most notably family separation. Thus, Achenbach also contributes to the research field of demographic developments within migrant populations.

Meng Liang, too, presents a study on the Chinese as Japan's largest ethnic minority, though at a different segment of the labor market. Her paper originated out of a multi-sited ethnography on Chinese agricultural laborers in rural Japan. The laborers she was studying resided in Japan under the technical internship program, which has long faced harsh international criticism for its exploitative character under the noble flag of international development assistance. Liang gives some first-hand impressions of the many hardships at this end of Japan's labor market through the eyes of Chinese migrant workers themselves. The main achievement of this paper is its rare presentation of the workers not solely as victims of a dubious migration scheme, but to add to this classification an outline of their position as agents. Using the concept of "place making," Liang shows how the Chinese workers attempt to form networks among themselves, and to negotiate spaces of freedom from their employers' supervision. Liang's study exemplifies the importance of viewing migrants as

agents, if we are to gain a comprehensive picture of the realities of international migration.

Beata Świtek invites us to shift our focus from the migrants as agents to the impact which international labor migration has on Japan as a receiving society of migration flows. Świtek shares the results of a quantitative and qualitative media analysis on the representation of the first batch of Indonesian health-care workers who arrived in Japan in 2008 under a bilateral economic partnership agreement between the two countries. This policy reform, which brings health-care workers from Indonesia, the Philippines, and most recently from Vietnam to Japan, has been and so far continues to be the only concrete government initiative aimed at counteracting the challenges of population aging through international labor migration. Świtek argues that in light of this demographic development a substantial rebranding of foreigners in Japan has become obvious. Based on her media analysis Świtek claims that the Indonesian health-care workers have been overwhelmingly framed as good-hearted individuals who can be trusted with the task of caring for Japan's elderly population. Previous negative images of foreign workers, such as the notorious foreign crime discourse, have been absent from this media coverage. Świtek continues to argue that this is but a first step of a longer journey, which will ultimately lead to a reassessment of familiar concepts of national imaginations in Japan.

I suggest that the five papers assembled in this special issue of *Contemporary Japan* should be viewed as pieces to the greater puzzle of understanding international labor migration to Japan. The papers present different perspectives on the topic, ranging from a focus on the handling of the issue by political actors to putting the migrants' life strategies or the surrounding societal dynamics at the center of interest. Correspondingly, the theoretical frameworks are manifold, and span across virtually all disciplines of social science research on Japan. The methodological approaches, too, vary substantially, and range from policy studies to ethnographic fieldwork and media analysis. Despite all variances, however, there are two main points that tie together the papers in this issue. Firstly, while the authors disagree on the degree and speed of the change, they share the opinion that change is in fact taking place within the social and economic realities of Japan. Secondly, all authors acknowledge the need for Japan's political actors, its business world, and members of society to quickly and in a sustainable manner address these changes, which are bound to profoundly challenge the familiar settings of political and economic participation as well as the social membership within the nation.

The fact that the authors of the issue are scholars early in their respective careers and of highly diverse backgrounds nurtures my hope to spark a far-

reaching, long-standing, and profound scholarly discourse on population aging and international labor migration to Japan. Some two dozen anonymous reviewers, without whose deep commitment to this very discourse this special issue would not have been possible, deserve much appreciation.