Closed Doors, Back Doors, Side Doors: Japan’s Nonimmigration Policy in Comparative Perspective

DIETRICH THRÄNHARDT
Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Platz der Weissen Rose, 48151 Münster, Germany

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Abstract
The article gives a systematic description of the Japanese policy of prohibiting the immigration of unskilled workers in the face of a world environment that is more and more open for travel, exchange, and communication of all kinds. The side effects of this policy are discussed, as well as three limited quasi-immigration schemes: ethnic Japanese from Latin America, trainees, and students. The exceptional Japanese case is then evaluated on the background of prevailing theories about the necessary tendency to open the wealthy world for more immigration, with a focus on the social welfare implications of the exception.

An anomaly among the rich nations?

Yet Japan remains an anomaly. It is the only industrial democracy that has not relied heavily on foreign labor to fuel economic growth in the postwar period, if we discount the resident Korean and Chinese populations (Hollifield, 1992, p. 15).

Cornelius (1994, p. 383) even describes Japanese women caring for their own children as an “anomaly,” thus making the U.S. pattern of an immigrant and black underclass a norm of international development. In this context, he does not discuss the policy outcomes of such divergence with respect to educational achievement or social coherence. The usual prediction then is that the Japan will follow other wealthy nations in letting in immigrants for “jobs like housecleaning, street sweeping, and garbage collecting,” the “demand for immigrant labor” becoming “increasingly resistant to government interventions” (Cornelius, 1994, pp. 383, 407). Other specialists choose to exclude the anomalous Japanese case from their reflections about a built-in tendency of liberal countries to become more and more open for immigration in a sort of elite conspiracy against the poorer strata of society who bear the costs (Freeman, 1995a, 1995b; Brubaker, 1995; Perlmutter, 1996). Neglecting Japan,
they do not mention this decisive deviant case and fall into another trap of American–European parochialism. This parochialism makes any general theoretical approach less meaningful, since Japan constitutes one of the three grand centers of advanced development, with a specific mix of traditional and imported features.

The Japanese exception is even more fascinating when we look into the Asian environment. In the last decades, Southeast Asia and the Middle East have become focuses of migration, on the same level as North America and Western Europe (Wong, 1998), mostly pursuing rotational and rather exploitative immigration systems at tremendous human costs on the side of the migrants. Malaysia and Thailand alone employ more than 1 million foreign workers each. Taiwan and South Korea, Japan’s former colonies, have officially started foreign worker programs. An important part of the Philippine national income originates in migrants’ remittances. In addition, China offers to send millions of redundant workers who are seeking employment; in 1998, their number was estimated at 120 million, or 10% of the population (“Woher der Wind weht,” 1998, p. 182). Why then, does Japan not allow immigration? What are the consequences of this decision, and how should we evaluate Japanese policies in contrast to those of other advanced countries?

Japan’s nonimmigration policy

In the Japanese report to the OECD of 1995, the Japanese government states, in rather diplomatic language,

The official policy of the Japanese government is to allow entry to foreigners with technological expertise, skills or knowledge or who engage in businesses which require a knowledge of foreign cultures not possessed by Japanese. On the other hand, the entry of unskilled workers is not encouraged, because of the potential impact on industry, labor, education, welfare and public security as well as because of the absence of a national consensus on the issue (OECD, 1995, p. 99; see also OECD, 1997, p. 122, and the official argument at length in Ministry of Justice, 1990).

At the heart of this reference to Japanese pluralism lies a longstanding and ongoing disagreement between the Ministries of Labor and of Justice. When I interviewed the responsible officer in the Ministry of Labor in 1991, he was quite outspoken about the necessity of unskilled labor immigration for the Japanese economy and about the opposing view of the Ministry of Justice on this matter. This situation has not changed in recent years, and the Ministry of Justice is keeping a watchful eye. Whereas up to 1993 Japan was not represented in the OECD immigration group at all—as it did not consider itself a country of immigration—since 1994 it has had two representatives, in contrast to all other countries: one from the Ministry of Labor, the other from the Ministry of