Japan’s Social Cohesion in Relation to Immigration Issues

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Introduction

In contemporary social research—whether dealing with the involvement of citizens in social life, national character, or the relationships between immigrant or minority groups and the host citizens—social cohesion has become a major topic. However, there is no universal definition of social cohesion (Demireva, 2015; Markus, 2010), though there have been some common understandings of the concept. In addition, this concept is also found in the elaboration of political doctrines as well as in academic analyses, and there are some key terms which can be identified when attempting to define this term. In the United Kingdom and other developed democracies, “[s]ocial cohesion is often identified as ‘solidarity’ and ‘togetherness.’” The OECD, in its report Social Cohesion in a Shifting World, suggests three perspectives: “social inclusion,” “social capital,” and “social mobility” (2012: 53–54). Another way of considering this is to focus upon three common elements: “shared vision,” “a property of a group or community,” and “a process” (Markus, 2010: 8). Extensive surveys of social cohesion have helped define the national character of some societies, and will often include a nation’s attitudes toward newcomers who arrive via some form of immigration. On the other hand, social cohesion is also interrelated with the way in which immigrants and minority groups become participants in social life and therefore in their relations with the citizens of the host nation. The dynamics of social cohesion are central to the ways in which they develop solidarity with the host community. According to the OECD Director for Employment, Labor, and Social Affairs, Mr. Stefano Scarpetta: “The policy objectives for migration have also shifted, as has the perception of the role of migration. Today’s policy debate places greater emphasis on social cohesion and less on urgent recruitment needs” (OECD, 2014: 10).

Japan’s situation has been complex for some time. For example, in terms of responding to the need for labor, the approach taken by Keidanren (the Japan
Business Federation)\(^1\) has not always been aligned with, or developing in the same direction as, government policies. In Japan, the current debate about migration and the growth of a significant immigrant labor force have not been explicitly associated with social cohesion. Rather, while the debate has concentrated upon the demand for more labor, it has also been the consequences of an increase in the population. In Japanese research, via extensive surveys that claim to investigate the phenomenon, the term or concept of social cohesion has not hitherto been generally applied, nor has it been referred to research frameworks or policy doctrines. However, this does not mean that governments, academics, and the general public are not keen to promote social cohesion. In other words, although the term has not yet been widely used, there is voluminous research relevant to an understanding of the concept and the key elements of Japanese social cohesion, as they have investigated social trust, social networks, social capital, and so on. In this chapter, I first discuss population issues and then explain how current migration issues are integrally related to these issues, highlighting some findings from Japanese research which are relevant to social cohesion.

**Population Issues and Japan’s Demographic Character**

Considering life expectancy, Japan’s figures show some outstanding characteristics. Japan ranks first among the World Health Organization (WHO) member countries in several respects. The statistics for 2012 report that “women in Japan have the highest life expectancy in the world at 87.0 years, followed by Spain, Switzerland and Singapore,” while Japanese men are ranked eighth (80.0 years) (WHO, 2014: 42). In terms of “healthy life expectancy,” Japan ranked first in 2010: “men were 70.42, while women were 73.62” (Koseirodosho, 2014: 44). People may live longer in Japan, but serious problems have arisen from the combined effects of such population aging and a very low birthrate. These trends have given rise to one of the more heated debates in Japanese society about deeply rooted problems relating to an insufficient labor force and the decline of local communities. These issues have required much public and private sector deliberation and are closely associated with issues related to the relaxation of immigration restrictions on overseas labor. In turn, public debate has also focused upon the deterioration of local communities in relation to the lack of, or underdevelopment of, personal support networks, which is in evidence around the country. These issues have been a major concern for governments and various scholars.

**Birthrates and Population Pyramid**

Japan experienced a rapid increase in the birthrate after the Second World War. In 1947, the total fertility rate was 4.54, and in the three years between 1947 and 1949, some 8.057 million were born in Japan (Kato, 2004: 35). This group is the Dankai sedai, or the baby-boomer generation. In 1966, the rate had declined to 1.58 due to the “Fiery Horse” superstition. This is the forty-third of a sexagesimal cycle. The superstition has persisted that girls who are born in this Fiery Horse year have