

**FOREIGN WORKERS IN JAPAN:
A LOOK AT JAPANESE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES
REGARDING NIKKEIJIN**

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The object of this research has been to study the status of Asian and South American immigrants currently residing and working in Japan. Traditionally, Japan has made cultural and racial homogeneity a major element of the nation and has thought negatively of immigration. Japanese officials have not easily granted foreigners the right and opportunity to settle permanently. Thus, Japan has a very low immigration rate and the lowest proportion of foreign residents of any major industrialized country.¹ With the current decline in birthrates, an aging population, and labor shortage, Japan's economic success may depend on foreign residents. Therefore, the issue of arriving foreign workers and their status in society must be addressed.

There is a prevalent concern among experts that xenophobic ideologies behind government policies, strict immigration laws, and negative media images have led to the cultural belief that foreigners are an intrusion on Japanese national identity and a disruption of the social cohesion. This results in problems in the workplace, marginalization, and the maladjustment of arriving immigrants. Foreigners are seen as an intrusion to the national identity because it is believed that they contaminate the race and may cause the nationals to lose their central element of homogeneity. This is not to say that other countries do not want to preserve a homogeneous nation in accordance with their own culture, but the Japanese believe they differ from others due to their unique historical background. Therefore, foreigners are believed to disrupt the social cohesiveness of society because their norms, values, and ethics are different. Many are stereotyped as criminals, troublesome, stupid, or simply lazy. The media frequently overstates crimes committed by foreigners in a way that justifies these stereotypes.

¹ Yoko Sellek, *Migrant Labour in Japan* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 223.

The case of the Nikkeijin has been investigated in order to study the relation between Japanese homogeneity and the problems faced by foreign workers in general. Nikkeijin are people of Japanese descent who were born abroad, mainly in Brazil, but have recently immigrated in large numbers back to Japan to work after the 1990 revision of the Japanese Immigration Control and Refuge Law. The revision of the immigration control law specifically granted second and third generation Nikkeijin unrestricted rights of residence and employment based on the assumption that Japanese blood and culture are associated criteria.² Thus, Japanese descendants would easily adjust in society and be culturally familiar workers, due to their ethnic ties.

However, this was not the case. The Nikkeijin were found to be disturbingly foreign, regarded as aliens, treated as secondary citizens, and placed in “3K” jobs (*kitanai* [dirty], *kitsui* [demanding], and *kiken* [dangerous]). As a result, the Nikkeijin along with other marginalized foreign workers have formed minority groups with transnational identities, linking their place of birth with their place of work, in hopes of one day exiting Japan.³ The difficulties of incorporating foreigners into society have already been illustrated by the experience of the Koreans and the Chinese. Now, the extent to which people of Japanese descent can be fully integrated not only depends on the government, but also on the relationship with the local population. Ultimately, the fundamental issue seems to be the way ethnicity is being perceived.⁴

Methodology

This research will first cover some existing literature and studies to give a brief explanation of the term Nikkeijin and a historical perspective on migration and immigration to and from Japan and Brazil in connection with the significance of racial/ethnic identity, assimilation, and Japanese homogeneity. Next, there will be a discussion on the current social and economic problems facing Japan, the issues concerning residential status,

² Daniela de Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil: The Nikkeijin* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p. xiii.

³ Mike Douglass and Glenda S. Roberts, eds., *Japan and Global Migration: Foreign Workers and the Advent of a Multicultural Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), pp. 4-7.

⁴ De Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil*, p. xiii.

citizenship, and immigration policies. Previous anthropological research done in the city of Hamamatsu at the Yusumi Motors factory by Joshua Roth and Daniela de Carvalho in Okayama Prefecture will be used to emphasize the role of Nikkeijin and their significant impact on society.

The hierarchy in labor markets will be examined and the marginalization and maladjustment of Asian and South American foreigners in the community will be addressed. Media and crime rates will be reviewed to show significant influences on nationals and the correlation between this and the disruption of social cohesiveness. Finally, all the data gathered will be analyzed and some suggestions will be made regarding the successful integration of foreign workers into Japan. Much of the current literature cited herein recognizes the high demand for foreign labor and the difficult issues of adjustment and assimilation faced by Asian and South American workers. Appropriate recommendations for the effective incorporation of immigrants and the possibility to realize a new multi-ethnic Japan are still being debated.

The Origin of Nikkeijin

What is the meaning of Nikkeijin? As described by anthropologist Joshua Roth, Nikkeijin is composed of Chinese characters that mean “sun line people.” The “sun” refers to the first character of the term for Japan, *Nihon*, which means “the origin of the sun.”⁵ However, it does not refer to ethnically Japanese people, who are referred to as *Nihonjin*. It normally refers to those who are overseas Japanese or members of the Japanese diaspora. As expressed by Daniela de Carvalho, Nikkeijin ethnicity was first created by the process of immigration to Brazil up until the 1970s and then by return migration back to Japan in the 1990s.⁶ During the modernization and industrialization of the Meiji period, Japan was undergoing many socioeconomic problems. Between 1885 and 1923 a half million Japanese left Japan to escape overpopulation, heavy taxes, and poverty.

While migrants soon faced strong resistance in other countries, Brazil had an evident labor shortage and it became the primary destination. In 1907, a contract signed by the president of the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil

⁵ Joshua H. Roth, *Brokered Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Migrants in Japan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 23.

⁶ Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil*, p. 66.

and the president of the Japanese Empire Emigration Company officially approved the migration to Brazil. By the 1950s, the Japanese community in Brazil was the largest outside of Japan. Since migration was seen as a means of solving problems for Japan, the Japanese government encouraged it by providing financial, medical, and technical assistance. They established Japanese language schools, newspapers, exchange programs, and other institutions. This resulted in the assumed maintenance of Japanese culture and ethnic ties in Brazil between the descendants and Japan, which will be further discussed.

Immigration and Homogeneity

For Japan, although emigration has been greatly encouraged, immigration has been seen as an intrusion on Japanese national identity and a disruption of social cohesion. Historically, foreign immigrants have been ignored by the island nation due to the fact that Japan had never been colonized, the experience of its two centuries of seclusion from the outside world between 1640 and 1850, and the extremely low number of foreign residents which is estimated at just over 1 percent of the total population.⁷ In addition, the government's belief that foreigners did not deserve the protection of Japanese law because they did not possess Japanese nationality has led to the continual disregard for their existence and the belief that immigration was so insignificant that it was not occurring. This belief was used to justify the idea that Japan consisted of a single race with a single culture and that any immigration is a threat to its racial purity.⁸ This ideology is closely related to the way Japanese people perceive their identity. According to Shumuel Eisenstadt, the Japanese view of immigration rests on their self-image as being part of "a country whose members can trace their lineage to an antique past, with 'Japaneseness' being more than a matter of race, residing in qualities that are inbred, inherent, even divine, and that therefore cannot be acquired by others no matter how long they reside on the Japanese islands."⁹

⁷ Roger Goodman, Ceri Peach, Ayumi Takenaka, and Paul White, *Global Japan: The Experience of Japan's New Immigrant and Overseas Communities* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 1-4.

⁸ Douglass and Roberts, *Japan and Global Migration*, p. 11.

⁹ Sociologist and professor emeritus, Shumuel Eisenstadt, received his doctorate in 1947 from Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His publications

Furthermore, the construction of the state in Japan was based on the idea of the nation as a family. This traces back to the origin myth of Japan, which explains the birth of the nation as the product of the relationship between two sibling gods. From this brother and sister relationship was born the Sun Goddess, from whom the Imperial house is said to descend.¹⁰ Thus, the view of the nation as a family sharing racial and cultural characteristics has always been the dominant ideology. In addition, prominent Japanese scholars have reinforced this ideology because they claim it has been favorable for Japan. Many say the Japanese are *sui generis*, consciously nationalistic, and cannot be understood by others because they are unique, which is assumed to be self-evident. By stressing this uniqueness, the consciousness of Japanese identity is raised along with strong feelings of ethnicity. This is interpreted as a way of recovering from the identity crisis that was generated by their defeat in World War II and Westernization and is associated with Japan's economic success and its connection with national pride. Therefore, government policy and the behavior of society has almost always reflected homogeneity and antipathy towards immigration, despite the evident presence of minority populations.¹¹

The fact is that foreign residents have been a source of cheap unskilled labor and an important part of the economy for decades. The victory over China in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and the annexation of Korea in 1910 began a major mobilization of foreign workers, not to mention the many Chinese and Korean immigrants already in Japan before that due to prior commercial and friendship treaties with China and Korea. Many Koreans in particular who were brought to Japan to work, were taught Japanese as a second language, and in many ways assimilated into Japanese society. Annexed people were made to worship at Shinto shrines and adopt Japanese-style names. By the end of World War II, approximately two million Koreans who had been treated previously as Japanese lost their Japanese citizenship with the restoration of Japan's

include *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). See quote in Sellek, *Migrant Labour in Japan*, p. 223.

¹⁰ Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, was born from the incestuous relationship between Izanami and Izanagi, sister and brother gods. See de Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil*, p. 116.

¹¹ De Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil*, pp. 116-118.

independence. As a result, they became Japan's largest foreign minority group. Since then, they along with the other existing minority groups, most of which have been culturally assimilated to speak and behave completely Japanese, have not been fully accepted in the society. They continually are victims of severe discrimination. In numerous cases, they have been excluded from certain sectors of the labor force and ignored by local communities.¹² Thus, many have gone to great lengths to try to hide their ethnicity.

Demographic Changes

For years, most immigrants have been living in a system of highly structured assimilation which leads to a sense of cultural invisibility due to their ostensible "non-existence" while suffering from severe examples of discrimination with no adequate protection under the law. It was not until the 1980s when foreign residents began to actively pursue their rights as members of society that government officials felt it was necessary to make adjustments to immigration laws and resident status. In addition, the drastic economic changes in the 1980s known as the "bubble economy" produced a high demand for foreign labor and increased immigration to Japan, which also caused the need for a change of certain policies. The economic success seen in the 1980s created a highly urbanized Japan. Since then, the average family size has decreased, birthrates have fallen, the population is aging, and low-wage positions are not being filled.¹³ Young Japanese are feeling increasingly affluent, well educated, and unwilling to work for low wages. The United Nations estimated that Japan would need to accept a total of 33.5 million immigrants between 1995 and 2050 to maintain the level of its working age population, ages 15 to 64, and to prevent the total population from declining.¹⁴

The demographic indicators underlie a fundamental crisis in Japan's economy. Domestic consumer markets are likely to shrink, savings rates are expected to plummet, and small and medium size enterprises that are the backbone of the economy and depend on low-wage labor will be unable to survive.¹⁵ Therefore, Japan had to reluctantly turn to foreign labor

¹² Sellek, *Migrant Labour in Japan*, pp. 16-21.

¹³ Douglass and Roberts, *Japan and Global Migration*, pp. 7-9.

¹⁴ Goodman, Peach, Takenaka, and White, *Global Japan*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Douglass and Roberts, *Japan and Global Migration*, p. xiv.

thirty years after Germany, France, and the United Kingdom did so. This significantly increased the number of immigrants allowed to live and find work in Japan, although currently their number remains relatively small compared to other major industrialized countries. In the year 2000, foreign immigrants were estimated at 1.2 percent (or 1.6 million) of the total population in Japan, 3.8 percent (or 2.2 million) of the total population in the United Kingdom, 8.9 percent (or 7.3 million) of the total population in Germany, and 9.8 percent (or 26 million) of the total population in the United States.¹⁶

Government Policies

The sudden increase of immigrants gave rise to the debate about citizenship status, residency, and immigration policy. As previously mentioned, Japanese policy is based on cultural homogeneity related to the origin of Japan, which is indicated by the Nationality Law. It states that citizenship is decided by blood and ancestry. Thus, Japan is a *jus sanguinis* society. All others, even if they are born on Japanese soil, are considered foreign nationals or immigrants. In order to screen the inflow of immigrants, policies have been strictly enforced. There are four main policies that regulate immigration control in Japan: the Alien Registration Law, the Special Law, the Immigration-Control and Refugee-Recognition Act, and the Nationality Law. Under the Alien Registration Law of 1952, foreigners who stay in Japan longer than ninety days are obliged to register. The Special Law, which was enforced in 1991 granted permanent residence to those who had lost Japanese citizenship with the restoration of Japan's independence after the Second World War, primarily of Korean and Taiwanese descent. Although provisional policies were in place to allow these foreigners to live without a condition of residency, it was not until 1991 that their legal status became stable. The Immigration-Control Act and its numerous revisions set the legislative framework for different types of status of residence, re-entry permits, and employment regulation.¹⁷

¹⁶ Goodman, et. al., *Global Japan*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Japanese Ministry of Justice (<http://www.moj.go.jp>, 2004).

Table 1 Government Policies and their Impact on Foreign Workers

Type of Foreign Worker	Policies Responsible for Origin	Policies Responsible for Livelihood	Impact on Foreign Worker	Resulting Abuse
Zaimichi Gaikokujin (Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese)	1939 Labor Mobilization Act, 1944 Korean Conscription Act	1945 Constitution 1945 Election Law 1952 Alien Registration Law 1989 Revised Nationality Law 1990 Revised Immigration Control 1991 Special Law 2000 Revised Immigration Control	No protection of rights, lose rights to vote, became “foreigners,” naturalization requires 3-5 yrs.of residence, depending on status, can legally work as “unskilled labor,” permanent residence to Zaimichi Gaikokujin, visa extensions according to status	Economic and political discrimination, state control and monitoring, racial discrimination
Nikkeijin (Brazilian)	1924-1941 Emigration Policy of the MHA 1953-1973 Emigration Policy of the MOFA 1990 Revised Immigration Control Act			
Asian Workers (Chinese, Filipino, Thai, Indonesian)	1982 Trainee System 1990 Revised Trainee System	1990 Revised Trainee System 1993 Technical Internship Program 1997 Revised Technical Internship Program	“Trainees,” not “workers”, trainees can work 2 years of training, period can be extended to 3 years	No labor protection, no compensation

One of the Immigration-Control Act's latest revisions in 2000 declared that the entry, residence, and departure from Japan depends on the categories of status of residence that are based on the intended activities in which a foreigner is permitted by the Minister of Justice to be engaged. Examples of residential statuses given up to three years include: professor, business manager, doctor, journalist, artist, and spouse or child of a Japanese national or permanent resident. Residential statuses for up to one year include: student, researcher, trainee/unskilled laborer, entertainer, and skilled laborer.¹⁸ Under the Nationality Law, naturalization requires applicants to have resided in Japan for a minimum of 5 years. As can be seen above, this leaves only the residents with permanent residence status eligible to apply. However, in the case of foreigners with resident status of spouse or child of a Japanese national, their residence requirement is reduced to three years.¹⁹

Nikkeijin as Unrestricted Residents?

The visible occurrence of new minorities in the society started a heated debate in the early 1990s over whether or not Japan should continue to receive large amounts of foreign workers, referred to as the *kaikoku* (open country) versus the *sakoku* (closed society) debate. Supporters of better treatment and protection of the rights of foreign workers argued that such workers would solve demographic problems, internationalize the society, and fulfill Japan's international responsibilities. Those who spoke against them were worried that foreigners would not assimilate, be difficult to incorporate fully into mainstream society, disrupt social cohesion, and cause consequences for the notion of nationhood. In addition, foreigners were a problem due to the country's economic costs of supporting them. The media, as will be shown later, heavily influences many of these prejudices.

The problem remained: How would Japan find a compromise in solving its demographic problems with its cultural homogeneity? To resolve this, the Nikkeijin were brought in.²⁰ According to the 1990 revision of the Immigration-Control Act, only foreign nationals of Japanese descent born abroad up to the third generation, or the spouses of such people, are

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Goodman, et. al., *Global Japan*, p. 4.

permitted to reside in Japan without legal or employment restrictions. The official explanation for granting the formal status of residence to them is that they can come to Japan to see the country where their ancestors grew up and visit their relatives. But since it will cost them money to stay with relatives, the government should allow them to work in order to recover the costs of their visit.²¹

The revision was consistent with Japan's idea of racial and cultural homogeneity and the assumption was that migrants of Japanese descent would help eliminate the labor shortage and because of their "ethnic ties," they would easily adjust and be accepted by society.²² However, studies suggest that this was not the case. At first the numbers of Nikkeijin were insignificant, but since then their population has grown to be one of the largest ethnic groups in the country and the one that has had the most impact. Although the government legally accepts them, it seems they have not, as with the case of other foreigners, been fully accepted or incorporated into mainstream society.

The Formal Arrival of Nikkeijin

As previously discussed, the Japanese descendants living in Brazil throughout the 1900s assumed that they had been keeping close ties with Japanese culture. Because of the economic problems they faced in Brazil, many Nikkeijin have taken advantage of their new preferred visa status in Japan as a solution, and by returning to their homeland have also gained an understanding of self-identity. Most Nikkeijin have been recruited to Japan by job brokering agencies in both Japan and Brazil that offer lifetime work benefits and identification with Japanese ideals. These agencies make profits of up to \$20 million per month. The migrants depend on the agencies not only for job placement but also to obtain the required documentation. Rates vary according to the agency. Some charge excessive fees, and many of the recruits arrive in Japan with considerable debt as a consequence of brokers' charges.

Many complaints and cases of exploitation by brokers have been reported. A frequent complaint is that the working and living conditions in Japan are different from those previously agreed upon in Brazil. Once they arrive in Japan, the majority are employed in factories and as general

²¹ Sellek, *Migrant Labour in Japan*, p. 75.

²² De Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil*, pp. 93-99.

workers, regardless of their educational or professional backgrounds. They tend to work for small to medium sized enterprises and are hired by subcontractors processing work for larger firms in the construction, metallurgy, manufacturing, auto and electrical industries. The Nikkeijin, like most migrants, take jobs unwanted by locals. They are contracted on a yearly basis. In many cases they cannot read the contract because it is written in Japanese, and it is not clear how salaries are calculated. At times, there are no written contracts at all. As temporary workers, they are not usually paid the bonuses that Japanese workers receive; however, other benefits might be offered. Although their wages are low, they are still about four times higher than those in Brazil.²³

Working Conditions

Although it seems the Nikkeijin are obligated to work long hours, they usually volunteer and compete amongst themselves for overtime. On average many work from 15 to 19 hours a day, with 5-minute rest breaks twice a day. They are estimated to do about 145 hours of overtime per month, and many go unpaid. According to their legal status, the Nikkeijin are entitled to employment insurance, accident compensation insurance, and national health and pension insurance. But despite these entitlements, many remain uninsured. Either the employers fail to make the necessary contributions or the workers themselves object to the contributions being deducted from their wages. Lack of knowledge and dependency on brokers are also responsible for this situation.

The Nikkeijin also tend to have more accidents at work than the Japanese. The main causes of accidents are said to be the lack of training and knowledge of safety rules, exhaustion due to long working hours, manipulation of dangerous machinery, and communication problems due to their lack of proficiency in Japanese. Although under the law workers are required to receive work-related accident insurance, the majority of job brokers do not pay this type of insurance, leaving the workers with little or no compensation at all. The majority of work-related accidents are cases of bone fractures, amputation of limbs or fingers, and burns. Many who do suffer these accidents cannot find a job afterwards because of their disability.

²³ De Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil*, pp. 93-99.

Living and Working in Hamamatsu

According to Roth's study conducted in the city of Hamamatsu at Yusumi Motors auto plant, in terms of employment, the Nikkeijin were put in a distinctly marginal position in relation to Japanese workers. They were hired for semi-skilled manufacturing jobs with the understanding that most of them would last no more than a few years. This served to give the firm a way to have a high proportion of workers at low wages, and to screen out less dedicated workers before they earned seniority. Japanese managers and co-workers expected them to behave and speak like Japanese, but they soon realized that the Nikkeijin were not the Japanese they had expected. The Nikkeijin could not speak the language and did not conform to Japanese practices and customs. They were categorized as foreigners, hired on short-term contracts, housed in separate dormitories, given different uniforms, segregated in bathing arrangements, and many were verbally abused.

These arrangements symbolically reinforced their marginal position within the firm and the larger labor market. Their marginalization simultaneously reflected and created feelings of distinction that Japanese workers held in relation to them. The Japanese often criticized the Nikkeijin as sloppy, irresponsible, rude, unwilling to assimilate, and lacking in gratitude and loyalty toward the firm. The stereotype of Nikkeijin's self-interest helped the bureaucracy, managers, and academics justify their marginal position in the employment system and the lack of effort to enforce labor regulations such as health and accident insurance. People whose medical conditions could have been treated effectively at an early stage were often denied professional care until their conditions became much more serious. Thus, the informal employment system in Hamamatsu denied Nikkeijin a feeling of belonging within the workplace and did indeed cause lack of gratitude and loyalty amongst them.²⁴

Divided Identity and Stratified Labor Market

Due to Japan's economic recession during the late 1990s, many Nikkeijin workers increasingly left the factories. When the workplaces fail them by not fulfilling the minimal criteria of community – respect and dignity – they turn not only toward transnational identifications with Brazil, but also toward the formation of their own local communities. They have recently developed social networks that have made their lives within

²⁴ Roth, *Brokered Homeland*, pp. 37-76.

Brazilian ethnic communities in Japan sufficiently fulfilling to extend their stays through the long recession that decreased overtime work and reduced wages. Many travel back and forth between Japan and Brazil. Some have returned permanently to Brazil. Others have settled in Japan, while maintaining their identification with Brazilian ideals. Therefore, the Nikkeijin have discovered a sense of self in Japan that is based on differences rather than identification with Japaneseness.²⁵

Another result of the Nikkeijin influx was the development of stratification in the labor market based on foreign legal status. Through government policy, Japan has organized its labor markets for foreign workers hierarchically according to race or nationality, regardless of the foreigner's talent, skill, or experience. This is due to the view that certain races and nationalities are uniquely qualified for certain kinds of labor, which determines the privileges granted and legal rights given to workers. Thus, it is the government's control over foreigners that determines their situation.

At the top of the foreign hierarchical scale are the Korean special residents or *zainichi gaikokujin*. They are considered to be "sociological Japanese" because they behave and speak like Japanese. Though they are free to live and work in Japan and receive government benefits, they cannot vote in national elections or work in civil services, nor can they participate in welfare commissions, human rights commissions, or school boards. Next in line are the Nikkeijin, although they are considered to be "ethnically Japanese," as discussed above, they act extremely foreign and few can actually speak Japanese fluently. They can also work legally and are entitled to certain benefits, but because they are underrepresented and go through brokers to find jobs, most who get injured do not receive compensation, in addition to being denied the same rights that are denied to the *zainichi gaikokujin*. Their main advantage has been the ability to openly change employers without fear of deportation. Then at the bottom end of the scale are all the other foreign workers considered to be illegal, unskilled, or "non-Japanese trainees," such as those from Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. They are not protected under any laws and usually work under

²⁵ Ibid.

the worst possible conditions with little or no chance of changing employment.²⁶

Table 2 Asian Foreign Workers in Japan²⁷

Type of Foreigner	Sociological Type	Sociological Traits	Occupation	Type of Legal Doc.	Discrimination
Zainichi Gaikokujin (Korean, Chinese)	“Sociological Japanese”	Born in Japan; different blood	Restaurants, pachinko parlors, self-employed	Permanent resident	Employment, housing, marginalization
Nikkeijin (Brazilian)	“Ethnic Japanese”	Born/raised abroad; same blood	Manufacturing, auto/electrical industries	Long-term resident/spouse or child of national	Employment, housing, exploitation, marginalization
Asian Workers (Chinese, Thai, Filipino, Indonesian)	“Non-Japanese”	Similar racial descent and culture	Manufacturing, entertainment	Trainee visa, entertainment visa	Employment, housing, exploitation, marginalization

2004 Foreign Ministry Panel Report

A recent article in *The Japan Times* reported the expressed concerns that Kazuo Kumagai, who recently headed a Foreign Ministry panel in Japan in October 2004, had over the various problems that foreigners such as Chinese, Brazilians, Filipinos and Peruvians face in their daily lives.²⁸ The panel report called these foreigners “newcomers,” as opposed to the Koreans in Japan, who while making up the largest group

²⁶ Apichai W. Shipper, “The Political Construction of Foreign Workers in Japan,” *Critical Asian Studies* 34/1 (2002): 41-45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁸ Kanako Takahara, “Japan Must Open Door to Foreign Workers, Panel Head Says,” *The Japan Times* (October 11, 2004).

are gradually shrinking in number. According to Kumagai, the newcomers are often exploited, suffering from poor working conditions and unpaid wages, and are usually excluded from the nationwide health care and pension systems. Statistics compiled by municipalities with a high concentration of these foreigners show that about 20 to 30 percent of school age children of such parents do not go to school and become delinquent. Among the council members was Yasuyuki Kitawaki, mayor of Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture, where Roth conducted his studies and where about 4 percent of the population is non-Japanese. "Kitawaki's input during the council meetings provided firsthand accounts of the realities surrounding foreigners in Japan," Kumagai said. "Japan cannot avoid these issues when mapping out a future vision of the nation," he stressed. "The government needs to face them with a firm resolve."²⁹

Does the Media Reinforce Ethnic Stereotypes?

This study now turns to the influence of media coverage in Japan. According to previous media studies, the Japanese watch an average of three and a half hours of television a day. That is one more hour than the average for Americans. In addition, 56 percent of the Japanese public expressed strong confidence in the credibility of television programming, compared with less than 20 percent in the United States. Another study found that executives in a variety of organizations rank the media as the most influential institution in Japan. Japan's public broadcasting corporation, NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai), is the second largest in the world and is the most trusted in Japanese society. Thus, media coverage of immigrants has a significant effect on public opinion and attitudes. After the 1990 revision of the Immigration Law, Nikkeijin have attracted a huge amount of media attention, which has placed them noticeably into public awareness. As a result, even though many Japanese nationals have not personally encountered Nikkeijin, they already have presupposed perceptions of them.³⁰

Throughout the 1990s several news reports began to establish notions now commonly held towards foreigners. Although there was considerable diversity in news coverage of Nikkeijin, the media generally

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Takeyuki Tsuda, "Domesticating the Immigrant Other: Japanese Media Images of Nikkeijin Return Migrants," *Ethnology* 42/4 (2003), p. 289.

legitimated and reinforced ethnic stereotypes and cultural attitudes about them.³¹ The cultural foreignness of Nikkeijin was very often explicitly emphasized. Many reports depicted them as strange and ethnic anomalies. In 1991, NHK attempted to explain the life of Nikkeijin by featuring them engaged in Brazilian activities, such as dancing samba, reading Portuguese newspapers, and playing soccer. It emphasized how Nikkei children did not speak Japanese because they were born and raised abroad.³²

In a TBS program, a street reporter asked two men waiting at a bus stop what they thought of the foreigners in their neighborhood. After an awkward moment, one of them said in English, “We not speak in Japanese.” When asked where they were from, the man replied in Portuguese, “Brasil,” eliciting surprise from the reporter. Because commercial networks are concerned with the popular appeal of their shows, they seize upon common Japanese reactions by exoticizing culturally foreign Nikkeijin in order to amuse and entertain their audiences.³³ A news report on Terebi News in 1998 expressed the views that Japanese housewives had towards immigrants. According to the report, the housewives described them as nosy people who did not dispose of their garbage properly.³⁴

In recent years, news of crimes committed by foreigners has been increasingly publicized. Since criminal records are based on arrests rather than convictions and non-Japanese are more likely to be arrested on suspicion of crimes than are Japanese, it appears that crimes by foreigners are rising. Close analysis of the arrests indicates that more than half of the penal code offences involve immigration and visa violations.³⁵ A recent article in *The Japan Times* reported that foreigners were involved in a “record” 47,124 criminal cases in 2004, according to the National Police

³¹ Ibid.

³² NHK “Taminzoku kyoju jidai” (The Age of Multiethnic Co-existence), (1991), see in Tsuda “Domesticating the Immigrant Other,” p. 294.

³³ TBS (Tokyo Broadcasting System), “Anata no machi no gaijin rōdōshatachi” (Foreign Workers in Your Neighborhood), (n.d.) see in Tsuda “Domesticating the Immigrant Other,” p. 297.

³⁴ Terebi News, (1998), in de Carvalho, *Migrants and Identity in Japan and Brazil*, p. 128.

³⁵ Douglass and Roberts, *Japan and Global Migration*, pp. 24-25.

Agency.³⁶ Police arrested or sent papers to prosecutors on a record 21,842 foreigners, up 9.2 percent from a year earlier for the fourth consecutive year of increase. In total, including Japanese nationals, there were 667,620 criminal cases reported. Cases involving foreigners accounted for only about 7 percent of this total. 389,027 people were arrested or the cases were sent to prosecutors for violations of the Penal Code. Foreigners accounted for only 2.3 percent of this total. Among the foreigners linked to crime rates, the Chinese accounted for 42.4 percent of the total number. South Koreans were second at 9.5 percent, followed by Filipinos, Brazilians, Thais, and Vietnamese.³⁷

Table 3 2004 Crime Rates in Relation to Foreigners³⁸

Type of Crime	Forgery	Burglary	Robbery	Car Theft	All Crimes
Total number of Criminals	384	13,548	4,154	3,823	667,620
Percentage of Foreign Criminals	58.6%	4.2%	8.1%	4%	7%

Results and Analyses

This study has clearly illustrated the xenophobic ideology behind government policies, immigration laws, and the media that has led to the cultural belief that foreigners are an intrusion to Japanese national identity and a disruption to social cohesion, which has caused problems in the workplace, marginalization, and the maladjustment of Nikkeijin and other Asian and South American immigrants. First, when looking at Japanese government policies and immigration laws, there is a direct indication that

³⁶ "Foreigners Tied to Record 47,124 Crime Cases in 2004," *The Japan Times* (February 25, 2005).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

the government reinforces lineage as the basis for Japanese nationality and is following policies that are in opposition with those of other advanced nations. The combination of Japan's fictive origin and the uniquely homogenous culture that has resulted from its natural and voluntary isolation is used as the means of justification for those policies.

In order to attend to demographic problems and uphold cultural homogeneity, two major policies were devised to bring in, but strictly screen immigrants: the 1990 revision of the Immigration-Control Law which brought the influx of Nikkeijin, and the 2000 revision which defined the screening process for all foreigners. With regard to the Nikkeijin, the idea of allowing people of Japanese descent to work legally and excluding all others of those benefits is obvious discrimination based on race and shows preference given to those with Japanese blood. With regard to the 2000 revision, the determining of entry, residence, and departure from Japan based on intended activities has not only been discriminatory but has led to unintended problems. Skilled foreigners are permitted residential status for only three years, while legal unskilled foreigners are allowed in the country for only one year.

As a result, though Japan has turned to foreign labor for economic support, the number of foreigners still remains relatively low. In addition, since residential statuses are so short-lived and working wages remain higher than in developing nations, the number of overstayers has dramatically increased. Due to the high demand for cheap labor, most overstayers tend to be illegal unskilled workers, which have caused much concern to citizens and legal residents alike. Therefore, the government's preference for descendents and efforts to screen out foreigners has not only maintained, but also reinforced the idea that immigrants are a threat to "Japaneseness" and justifies discrimination within the labor force and local communities.

In terms of the media, there is barely any doubt that reports of immigrants have a significant effect on public opinion and attitudes. As Tsuda explains, "Japanese perspectives about Nikkeijin are based almost exclusively on television and newspapers because the Japanese Brazilians remain a minute fraction of Japan's population and very few Japanese have encounters with them."³⁹ Unfortunately, media coverage up until now has emphasized the fact that Nikkeijin are in many ways different from the

³⁹ Tsuda, "Domesticating the Immigrant Other," p. 300.

Japanese, and have had difficulties assimilating to Japanese lifestyle. In addition, the media has also been increasingly reporting crimes committed by all foreigners. The public is then left with images of Nikkeijin and foreigners as strange people who commit crimes and disrupt society's cohesiveness. The fact is that although foreigners may racially and culturally differ from the Japanese, they are not exclusively the ones causing harm to society. When analyzing crime rates, one can see that out of 667,620 criminal cases reported, cases involving foreigners accounted for only 7 percent. Out of the 389,027 people who were actually arrested, only 2.3 percent were foreigners. The media does an excellent job of overestimating immigrants' probabilities of committing crimes.

The studies conducted by de Carvalho, Roth, and Apichai Shipper indicate that exploitation, marginalization, and maladjustment of Asian and South American immigrants in the workplace and in society is evident. In reference to this research, it must be noted that although discrimination towards foreigners in general does exist, the extent of that discrimination may vary according to individual differences. Due to length of time and setting limitations, factors such as age, gender, personality, and personal background that may vary the degrees of injustice experienced were not specified. However, overall findings do suggest that ethnic stereotypes of Nikkeijin and foreigners have helped the bureaucracy, managers, and academics justify their marginal position in the employment system and the lack of effort to enforce labor regulations. The fact that Nikkeijin have developed their own social networks, formed their own local communities, and turned to transnational identification with Brazil also suggests that they have not adjusted to or been fully accepted by the local Japanese population.

Dealing with Globalization

As can be seen, there are several problems with the way the Japanese government has tried to handle demographic changes and incorporate foreigners into the labor force. With the coming of the global age, not only does Japan have to continue facing its own demographic changes, but it also has to deal with a global migration that is no longer tied to certain nations. As explained by Mike Douglass and Glenda Roberts, "migration to Japan is not necessarily for the purposes of sustaining Japan's competitive position, but is more accurately a part of an emerging international labor system that spans national space and is as concerned with supplying labor for domestic services as it is with production for

export.”⁴⁰ Japan must inevitably face the challenge of co-existing with the presence of what is likely to be millions of additional immigrant workers.

In order to face this challenge and solve its own problems, Japan must welcome foreigners as individuals with full human rights and not treat them as just a source of temporary labor. In accordance with global processes, many immigrant workers and their families tend to settle down and remain in their host countries, as with the case of the Nikkeijin in Japan. Coming to terms with globalization requires Japan to rethink citizenship and all the rights and benefits that come along with it. Are laws such as the Nationality Law, the Special Law, and Immigration-Control Law really justifiable even though they reinforce ethnocentrism? Although discrimination of foreigners will to some extent always exist in any society, the government should reform their current laws and try to uphold and implement equality of foreign residents to the highest degree. Because Japan has had such a unique past in dealing with immigrants in comparison with other nations, it will take much more effort from the government and the Japanese people to overcome difficult situations.

Integration of Foreigners in the Labor Force

As suggested by Haruo Shimada, the best course of action for the smoother integration of foreigners into the labor force is to reform the employment system.⁴¹ All legal workers must be guaranteed the same eligibility for residential status and length of time, the right to receive proper compensation for accidents at work, proper training, working conditions, medical insurance, unemployment benefits, the right not to be discriminated against either at work or socially, the right to a pension, the right to education (such as for improving Japanese language skills), and the right to vote. The government should see that all these institutional rights are strictly enforced. Once the government demonstrates an effort to make significant changes within the society, the media will pick up the increased sense of national concern. When foreigners have the full backing of both the government and the media, the Japanese population most likely will be encouraged to give the same support. In return, foreign workers may express signs of gratitude and loyalty towards their employers as well as

⁴⁰ Douglass and Roberts, *Japan and Global Migration*, p. 28.

⁴¹ Haruo Shimada, *Japan's Guest Workers: Issues and Public Policies* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1994), pp. 3-11.

produce more efficient work. This is not to say that the Japanese people will automatically adjust psychologically to the idea of social equity and a multicultural society, but it is the start to a journey that, wanted or unwanted, has already begun.

What Exactly Does It Mean To Be Japanese?

In conclusion, the ideological significance of this research is the fundamental issue of perceived ethnicity. This new relationship between the Japanese nationals and the Nikkeijin should provide an opportunity for the Japanese government to rethink exactly what it means to be Japanese. If Japanese lineage gives the image of someone that speaks, acts, thinks, and looks Japanese, then the Nikkeijin contradict Japanese fundamental ideology altogether. The Koreans who have lived there most of their lives assimilate more to Japanese culture than the Nikkeijin, and they obviously do not have Japanese blood. As Yoko Sellek explains, “The traditional dichotomy of Japanese versus non-Japanese is no longer applicable or useful for understanding the current situation where there is a whole spectrum of categorizations to be considered ranging from so-called ‘indigenous Japanese’ to so-called ‘non-Japanese.’ In this sense, the way in which Japanese society treats over 245,000 Nikkeijin is adding further contradictions to Japan’s long-standing assumption of one nation and one ethnicity.”⁴²

⁴² Sellek, *Migrant Labour in Japan*, p. 82.