

# The Future of Japan's Immigration Policy: a battle diary

**Sakanaka Hidenori**

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**By Sakanaka Hidenori**

**Introduction by Andrew Taylor and David McNeill**

*A former director of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau, Sakanaka Hidenori ended his 35 year career as a Justice Ministry official in 2005. Shortly after retiring, he published Immigration Battle Diary probably the most detailed discussion yet on the future of Japanese immigration policy and the role of immigrants in the world's second largest economy. The abridged translation presented here is based mainly on the book's final chapter, which summarizes Sakanaka's views on the immigration options facing Japan.*

*Sakanaka's intervention could not be more timely. With little net immigration to offset a falling fertility rate, the population of over 127 million is set to plummet to just over 100 million by the middle of the century. The number of permanent foreign residents recently passed two million, or 1.57 percent of the total population, a tiny figure for a developed country. The contracting workforce will be asked to support a growing army of pensioners in a country with the longest life-expectancy in the world. By 2005, there will be just two younger workers supporting each retired person, down from 11 in 1960.*

*Alarmed at the prospect of the last Japanese pensioner switching out the lights, probably sometime in the 22nd century, the government – made up mostly of older males -- has swung*

*into action, with sometimes comical results. In a gaffe-strewn foray into the marriage and fertility debate, Welfare Minister Yanagisawa Hakuo recently said Japan had a "fixed number" of "baby-making machines" aged 15-50 and recommended "healthy" youngsters should have at least two children. The political message – that women and not government policies are responsible for the lack of babies – infuriated opposition Social Democratic Party leader Fukushima Mizuho and many others. "Yanagisawa's remarks were tantamount to telling women to give birth for the nation," said Fukushima. "The [ruling] Liberal Democratic Party is to blame for this problem itself for not creating the environment where women want to have children."*

*Immigration Battle Diary is not available in English so a brief discussion of some of the other issues raised in the previous chapters may help to provide some context. The book begins by describing the work of immigration officers on the trail of foreign gangs, human traffickers and visa violators on the streets of Kabuki-cho, an area of the capital Sakanaka describes as "having a reputation for danger". "Drugs, prostitution, violence, murder, extortion, gambling and illegal immigrants" top his list of problems. As an immigration officer's memoir, it is unsurprising that in the book's early pages Japan's foreign community comes across largely as a target for the attention of law enforcement. Yet, as you move through the book, it becomes clear that the author's view of Japan's immigrant issues is far from one-dimensional and his recommendations for immigration policy far from the official mainstream.*

*As an immigration officer, Sakanaka also came into regular contact with Japan's ethnic Korean community, who are required to register as aliens even if their ancestors have lived in Japan for generations. Sakanaka describes the indelible impression left by a boy with Korean citizenship who arrived at an immigration office at the age of 14 having been told for the first time by his parents that he was not Japanese. He expresses indignation at the discrimination that forces parents to lie to their children and laments what he sees as the likely disappearance of Japan's Korean minority through intermarriage and naturalization, a process which requires the assumption of a Japanese name. Although at first sight they appear to be two unrelated issues, Sakanaka sees the ethnic identity of Japan's Korean minority as closely linked to the resolution of Japan's looming population crisis.*

*He considers the relationship between Japanese society and its Korean minority as a litmus test for the relationships Japan would need to build with new arrivals if it were to accept a large number of immigrants to arrest future population decline. Sakanaka sees Japan's lack of experience in dealing with ethnic minorities as a major barrier to successful immigrant assimilation. He suggests that providing ways for Japan's Korean minority to maintain their ethnic identity, while granting full citizenship rights, would mark the first steps towards a multicultural society welcoming to immigrants. Conversely, if Japan's Korean minority were allowed to disappear, it would mark a lost opportunity to embrace multiculturalism, and increase the probability that any future attempts at ethnic integration would fail.*

*In this essay, Sakanaka acknowledges that if Japanese society is unable to reach a consensus on the benefits of large-scale immigration, demographics could be allowed to follow their present course. However, he points out that allowing the population to decline should be*

*considered an active choice that should only be made with full awareness of the possible economic, social, political and cultural consequences.*

## **The Future of Japan's Immigration Policy**

Japan's population, which peaked at 128 million in 2004, is falling. If current trends continue, it will drop below 90 million within 50 years and fall by two-thirds to 40 million within 100 years [1]. As Japan's population falls, many people say the country's future is bleak. The general mood is pessimistic. Dire predictions include a massive decline in economic growth. I think it is unwise to spark fear with such predictions. Yet if current trends continue, Japan will inevitably witness an unprecedented population decline. What lies ahead? Radical change is required. The Japanese people must not shirk from addressing this national issue.

During the Meiji Restoration that ended Japan's feudal period, fierce debate on whether to exclude or welcome foreigners divided the population. As Japan now faces another period of sweeping social change, the country must again profoundly discuss its future. How will Japanese livelihoods change? What road will Japan travel? In these pages, I focus on immigration to suggest two diverging roads Japan can take as its population declines.



Migrant workers

As a starting point, a debate on migration must consider the role of the immigration authorities, who control international population movements. This role takes on extreme importance in a time of population decline. As long as there are large international differences in population distribution and economic development, people will move from overpopulated developing countries to sparsely populated wealthy ones. As of 2005, only 1.2 billion of the world's 6.5 billion people resided in developed countries. During the 21st century, the world's population will draw ever closer to 10 billion and mass migration from the developing world to the developed world is widely expected to occur. Competition on the international labor market will grow ever fiercer as developed countries seek to maintain their nation and their economy in the face of population decline.

Such developments do not imply that people will be able to move freely across international borders. In the 21st century, the international

order will still be comprised of sovereign states, each based on the essential elements of "territory" and "citizenship". Immigration authorities in various countries will continue to consider their primary mission the protection of the national standards of living and social order through the restriction of migration.

Some countries in Europe are already experiencing population decline, but no country in the world has ever experienced such dramatic change or serious problems as those which await Japan. Therefore, Japan will have to take the lead in discovering how to deal with a declining population and show the world its vision for the future.

### A fork in the road

We can examine how Japan could address population decline by considering the following two extreme options. The Small Option is to allow the population to decline. The Big Option is to compensate for the impending population decrease by accepting immigrants, maintaining Japan's current position as an economic powerhouse. The Small Option would maintain the status quo. The Big Option would increase Japan's ethnic minority population. Whichever option is chosen, Japanese citizens will have to overcome difficult obstacles.

### The Small Option

The Small Option would aim to accept the natural population decline and allow the development of a more laid-back society of perhaps 80 million people. An essential part of this scenario is the use of strict policies to limit immigration into Japan. However, if the population continues to fall, there is a high chance of economic depression and social stagnation. Choosing this option requires an awareness of these possible outcomes.

Under this scenario, native Japanese people would continue to play all the major roles

involved in running the economy and society. Immigration controls would be tightened. The government could adopt immigration policies that basically barred entry to foreign laborers and other immigrants. The feasibility of The Small Option depends on whether the number of people from other countries seeking to work in Japan can be precisely controlled. As the population of the developing world rises and the desire of developing world workers to live and work in the developed world grows steadily stronger, Japan will need immigration controls strong enough to withstand the pressure of these migratory forces. Starting with China, many of Japan's neighbors have huge populations and outward migratory pressure. Japan will not be able to prevent a mass population influx without building stronger walls around its borders.

Citizens living in a society with a continually shrinking population will not only have to change their lifestyles but will also have to take on greater responsibility. They will have to take an outlook on life molded by an expanding society and modify it to fit a contracting one. They will need to move from a lifestyle that celebrates richness to one that celebrates simplicity. As the country tries to maintain its social welfare system, they will have to bear higher tax levels and accept lower levels of pension and other benefits.

If the Japanese people keep rigidly to the basic stance outlined above, we can imagine that in the latter half of the 21st century Japan may become a mature society with a moderate-sized population living a comfortable, relaxed lifestyle in a rich natural and social environment. It is quite possible that in a slow-paced, peaceful society, more people may want to have a large family and the population may bottom out and start to rise once again. In the 21st century, problems associated with population growth which affect the global future, such as resource depletion and environmental destruction, are expected to

grow more serious. Japan's affirmation of population decline and attempts to build a more 'compact' society could well be welcomed by the international community.

## The Big Option

The Big Option, on the other hand, would aim to compensate for the natural decline in the Japanese population through a mass influx of immigrants, supporting a "dynamic Japan" that maintained economic growth. Japan would keep its position as a leading global economy and maintain its current standard of living. The success of the policy would depend on how far Japan could develop an openness towards the new arrivals. If this path is chosen, immigrants would play important roles in Japan's economy and society. The Japanese people's tendency to embrace growth and fundamentals of the economy would not change.

To implement The Big Option, the country would need to accept over 20 million immigrants during the next 50 years. Before welcoming such an unprecedented influx, Japan would need to build a national consensus that new arrivals should be welcomed as "friends" and contributors to Japanese society. Japan would have to transform itself into a land of opportunity, building an open, fair society which guaranteed equal opportunity, judged people on their merits, and allowed everyone to improve their social status regardless of origin or ethnicity.

Japan's criteria for accepting new arrivals and its immigration procedures would have to be open, transparent and fair if immigration authorities were to appropriately process a vast number of immigration applications. A major issue would be how to define acceptance criteria. The state's basic attitude to the treatment of foreigners would also be called into question. Under Japan's current policies, which generally view foreigners as a target for control and regulation, Japan will not be able to



make the leap and become a tolerant multiethnic society.

The government would have to emphasize deeper integration between Japanese and other nationalities. It would have to transform governmental administration to better account for immigrant needs and guarantee immigrants and ethnic minorities the same rights as native Japanese. The smooth integration of newcomers into society should be placed at the centre of government policy, with a particular emphasis on Japanese language education and employment assistance. The government would also have to ease the passage to citizenship.

Of course, if Japan were to become a multiethnic society, problems resulting from differences in ethnicity, culture and religion would be unavoidable. The government would have to mediate the conflicting interests of different groups and avoid provoking interethnic conflict. It would also take on the heavy responsibility of establishing principles to promote social integration, binding the various ethnic groups together as Japanese citizens. To responsibly tackle these serious issues, the state would need to establish a national Immigration Agency with a mandate to plan and implement comprehensive policies for the treatment of immigrants, promote the social integration of ethnic minorities, and monitor and prevent discrimination.

We should note that even if Japan managed to resolve its immediate problem of population decline through the acceptance of immigrants, Japan would, in the not-too-distant future, come up against various obstacles including the social burden of large-scale migration, and environmental and energy problems.

### **Pulling up the drawbridge?**

From the perspective of Japan's history and the status quo, it seems clear that of the two scenarios The Small Option is more easily

attainable. Japanese society currently lacks the capacity to accept 400,000 immigrants a year. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect the Japanese people to welcome so many immigrants when they have almost no experience of living together with people from other countries. We may also consider that Japan has, like certain other countries in Asia, an extremely high, perhaps excessive, population density. Perhaps we should look squarely at our overpopulated society and its negative consequences such as environmental destruction, deterioration in living quality, and the psychological damage that comes from over-competition.

If we wish to preserve the environment and bequeath a stable society to Japanese citizens 50 or 100 years hence, a decline in population over at least the first half of the 21st century may be desirable. A slow-paced country with a small population, perhaps not unlike New Zealand, is a legitimate aim. This scenario requires the maintenance of strict policies to prevent immigration and resolve various difficult issues.

As stated above, the success of The Small Option would depend on whether Japan can reliably prevent the arrival of immigrants. Having specialized in immigration issues, I am most concerned about the force of external migratory pressure within neighboring countries as their populations expand and their economies grow. China in particular, with its huge population stands out among the rapidly growing economies of the 21st century that will heavily impact Japanese immigration control. Even if the immigration authorities try to protect Japan's borders with maximum security, will their barriers withstand the pressure of massive population movement? Couldn't strict immigration controls end up encouraging a proliferation of sophisticated infiltration techniques?

If the walls of Fortress Japan risk being swamped by waves of chaotic, illegal

immigration, then the idea of opening up the country's gates in a limited and controlled fashion may start to look more attractive. If Japan decides to adopt a shrinking society as its basic policy, the country will also have to address the serious issue of personnel shortfalls in key industries and core societal systems that fail to deal with rapid population change.

An immediate requirement would be the maximization of available labor through the reorganization of Japanese industry to redistribute personnel. Urgent action would also be required to expand employment opportunities for elderly people and women. If all of these efforts fail to secure the required labor, then the government could choose to make exceptions to the strict immigration policies of "Small Japan" and permit the entry of the minimum number of immigrants required to maintain Japan's basic infrastructure.

Another issue with the "Small Japan" policy is the fate of Japan's rice fields and forests, which are threatened by a serious shortage of young people ready to take over agriculture and forestry work from their parents. The government will not be able to ignore the potential disappearance of farming and mountain communities as the population rapidly drops. Faced not only with the need to maintain food supply and natural resources, but also with the need to preserve the land, the environment and the sustainability of rural society, the Japanese people may come to accept immigrant workers in the agriculture and forestry industries.

However, the immigrants accepted into Japan as an emergency measure to address population decline should be recognized as permanent immigrants, not simply temporary economic migrants. This is because granting new arrivals legal protection and treatment consummate with their status as potential Japanese citizens is a better way to encourage

talented people to remain in Japan.

In short, various issues need to be addressed. But I consider the biggest risk in pursuing the Small Option to be government inaction and the postponement of reform. In such a situation, we are unlikely to witness the birth of reform-minded politicians capable of planning for Japan's long-term future. Before long, Japan may begin sliding rapidly backwards as problems and contradictions left unattended begin to take hold of the country.

### Opening the Gates

Recently many Japanese industrialists have begun to advocate the acceptance of large numbers of overseas immigrants to address labor shortfalls, consumer market shrinkage and pension funding problems that population decline will bring. But can the Japanese people, who have little experience of living together with those of different ethnicity, welcome large numbers of immigrants without adequate mental and physical preparation?

If current attitudes remain unchanged, the public may be unable to deal with a massive increase in immigration, and hostility may erupt. Labor market competition and cultural friction could provoke violence between native Japanese and immigrants, leading to public calls for immigrant repatriation. Such developments would leave deep-seated resentment. Regional conflicts across the world show us that the road to peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic groups is not easy. Mutual understanding and integration can only be achieved with great effort.

The perceptions of the majority are important here. Citizens without pride in their own ethnic group and culture cannot be tolerant towards other ethnic groups, nor can they win their respect. If native Japanese are to build good relationships with people from other countries, they must have an awareness and sense of

pride in themselves. They will also have to treat other ethnic groups, including other Asians, as equals.

Given Japan's history as an island populated by people with a shared culture and common outlook, developing close personal relationships with people of different cultures will not be easy. As a first step, Japanese society will need to move away from valuing homogeneity and wariness of individualism and begin respecting and embracing individual differences. Japan will have to implement nationwide educational activities in homes, schools and workplaces to achieve a balanced view of immigrants.

Looking at the way corporations employ foreign workers, for example, it is clear that new arrivals are not granted the same treatment as native Japanese and little attempt is made to evaluate and leverage their talents and sensibilities. The majority of immigrant workers are simply being used as a source of cheap labor. Talented personnel will steer well clear of companies with such discriminatory structures, preventing Japanese corporations from recruiting international talent. To attract overseas personnel, Japan must develop a corporate culture that confers status and income based on ability, irrespective of nationality or ethnicity. Perhaps in such a climate, innovative leaders in the mold of Sakamoto Ryoma (1836-1867: former merchant samurai and later political visionary who helped lead the fight against feudal Japan after the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry's black ships) may emerge from among the native Japanese or immigrant population, leading to the creative destruction of Japan's rigid social structures and the opportunity for a renewal of Japan's political, economic and cultural life.

### **A society based on coexistence?**

There are approximately 2 million people

without Japanese citizenship living in Japan. Since around 450,000 of this total are Special Permanent Residents with North Korean or South Korean citizenship, the number of actual immigrants is around 1.55 million or just over 1% of the total population. As such, Japan may appear insular.

However, Japanese immigration laws allow a wide range of foreign workers, particularly skilled workers, to enter the country. The total number of long-term foreign residents has risen significantly from 1.08 million in 1992 to 2.01 million in 2005. But why doesn't it feel as if this significant increase in foreign residents of Japan has brought about increased interaction and deeper understanding between native Japanese and other nationalities?

We do not often see Japanese people praising the work of foreign residents and warmly welcoming them as friends and colleagues. It is rare to hear of a foreign resident of Japan who has achieved notable successes or a good social reputation. It is far more common to hear of problems - problems adjusting to society, problems with children's education, problems of discriminatory treatment, housing problems, social insurance problems - the list goes on and on.

There are clearly many deficiencies with the system Japan has in place for accepting immigrants. But Japanese society today is not simply intolerant of people specifically because they come from overseas. The problem goes deeper. I think its roots are in the increasing number of Japanese people who have decided to ignore those around them. Resolving these issues rests on the extent to which we can increase the number of conscientious, open-minded Japanese who show consideration for those in weak positions.

The native Japanese have lived as a single ethnic group for nearly 1000 years and it will be a difficult task for them to build friendly

relationships with other ethnic groups. There will likely be many who would prefer to deal only with other Japanese people rather than foreigners with different customs and ideas. From an emotional point of view, I would also prefer to choose The Small Option, with people of Japanese ethnicity in the overwhelming majority.

However, stopping the tide of globalization is impossible. Japanese people can no longer ensconce themselves in a "Japanese only world". Regardless of personal preference, it will be necessary to live together with immigrants in some capacity. Native Japanese will have to develop an ethnic identity and recognize that all ethnic groups are equal in order to form close personal relationships with immigrant groups. How many people in Japan currently have both a sense of their own ethnicity and a spirit of tolerance? How much public will is there to create a multiethnic society?

As Japan's population declines, the number of foreign residents will surely increase year by year. If such growth is unplanned, localities with a large immigrant population may experience interracial friction and conflict leading to discrimination, prejudice, alienation and crime. Such serious problems may start to occur frequently. But if the immigration issue is simply ignored, skilled overseas workers will not look towards Japan.

Japan is by no means a closed society in the usual sense of the word. Quite the contrary, Japanese society has a wealth of diversity and a history of proactively assimilating foreign culture. From a religious perspective, Shinto, Buddhism and Christianity all exist together peacefully. Japanese people already have an ingrained tendency to accept different values and practices. As such, Japan already has a fertile soil for the growth of peaceful coexistence and harmony.

If Japanese society changed course and began to emphasize respect for diversity, then surely numerous people would start to develop a more welcoming attitude. If that could be achieved, the establishment of a Japanese-style multi-ethnic society, rooted in Japan's history and social climate, might not be far off.

### About the author:

Sakanaka Hidenori was born in 1945. In March 1970, he graduated with a Masters Degree from the Keio University Graduate School of Law and began working at the Ministry of Justice. In 1975, he won an essay competition organized by the Ministry's Immigration Bureau with an essay entitled "Towards Future Immigration Policy in Japan." Sakanaka went on to realize a legal framework for many of the policies outlined in this paper while serving as manager of the Entry and Status Division, Director of the Nagoya Immigration Bureau and finally Director of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau. He retired in March 2005 and is currently director of the [Japan Immigration Policy Institute](#). His recent books include *Building a Society Which Can Give Dreams to Immigrants* (Gaikokujin ni Yume o Ataeru Shakai o Tsukuru), Nihon Kyohosha (2004), and *Immigration Battle Diary* (Nyukan Senki), Kodansha (2005).

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