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## Challenging Japan's Monoethnic Myth:

### The Histories and Experiences of Japanese Ethnic Minorities

How does one define Japanese? If a person is Japanese, what exactly does that mean? Is it anyone who is a legal citizen of Japan? Is it someone who is ethnically Japanese, regardless of whether they live there or not? Does it matter whether they are full Japanese or only half? If they can speak the language? If they know Japanese manners and customs? And are all these people the same level of Japanese or are their "tiers" of sorts? Is an ethnically Japanese person living in the U.S. more or less Japanese than a U.S.-born expat who gains Japanese legal status? What would those people consider themselves? Does everyone with Japanese heritage consider themselves Japanese? Does everyone who lives in Japan get to be Japanese? What if they don't want that label?

These are the sorts of questions that are constantly debated and opinions on them vary greatly, but this question of who is and is not Japanese has a great deal of consequence, especially for those on the margins who may be Japanese by one definition and not by another. With this in mind, I'd like to discuss some of the historical changes in the prevailing definition of "Japanese" and how those shifts relate to the experiences of Japan's often overlooked minority groups.

Japan is not a very diverse country when compared to places like the U.S., but there are a variety of groups within Japan that differ to varying degrees in terms of ethnicity and culture from the majority group. For various reasons, even many Japanese people are unfamiliar with

them and their histories. The image of Japan as monoethnic exists both within and without the country (Lie 2001; Sugimoto 2010, 3-5, 9, 196; Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 284-85). Part of this is because most of the minorities within Japan are still East Asians, and many find it easier to pass as Japanese and just get on with their daily lives. However, they do still face discrimination, and the fact that there is so little awareness can make it difficult for them to advocate for changes.

When examining these groups, there is some difficulty at the outset because the Japanese government does not collect data on ethnicity in their official census (Lie 2001). Thus, no one knows for sure what the ethnic makeup of the nation of Japan actually is. The numbers available are all approximations, but the general estimate is that around 5% of the total population (6-7 million people) are non-majority Japanese (Sugimoto 2010, 8, 198; Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 12). The only concrete number available is the official register of foreign nationals—a count of 2.25 million—but this official number does not include those who entered illegally or who overstayed their visas (Sugimoto 2010, 218-19; Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 11).

The main groups to discuss are the Burakumin, the Ainu, Okinawans, Zainichi Koreans, Haafu, and New Migrants. These groups all have a different relationship to the majority: some are indigenous groups, some are foreign nationals and their descendants, and some are marginalized populations within the majority ethnicity.

### **Burakumin**

The *Burakumin*, literally “hamlet people,” are the largest minority group in Japan. They are not ethnically distinct from the majority Japanese population, but they are believed to have “impure” bloodlines based on their residency in certain *Buraku* areas (Cangià 2012, 361).

Official Japanese government estimates state that there are 4,000 *Buraku* areas and 2 million *Burakumin*, but due to ongoing debates between the government authorities and some community members, it is likely that the true number is closer to 6,000 *Buraku* and 3 million *Burakumin* (Cangià 2012, 361; Sugimoto 2010, 7, 204). Most of these *Buraku* are located in rural parts of the Kansai region and other parts of Western Japan (Samuel 2008, 181; 183).

Discrimination against the *Burakumin* is historically predicated on their traditional occupations, and ill feelings toward certain jobs may date back centuries. The official classification of the groups that are now considered *Burakumin* are usually attributed to the Edo Period caste system put in place by the Tokugawa Shogunate. The imperial family was above the system, and the four main groups below them were the samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants, in that order. Below them and outside of the formal system were two groups: the *Eta* (“the defiled”) and the *Hinin* (“nonhumans”) (Sugimoto 2010, 205). The *Eta* were considered impure by both Buddhist and Shinto standards because they dealt in trades involving blood and death, such as butchering, leatherwork, and undertaking. The *Hinin* were made up of street performers, lepers, criminals, and prostitutes, among other such social outcasts. Both groups were legally distinct from the rest of society and were forced to live in set districts. The caste system required individuals to marry within their group and carry out their designated jobs, leaving the *Burakumin* restricted to their “defiling” work. The descendants of the *Eta* and the *Hinin* make up today’s *Burakumin*, who are still identified based on their living in those designated districts (Samuel 2008, 181-183).

The Meiji Restoration brought an end to the formal Tokugawa caste system, and in 1872 both the *Eta* and the *Hinin*, at the time numbering around 400,000 people, were declared *dōwa* (“same Japanese”) and incorporated into society as the *Shin Heimin* (“new commoners”)

(Samuel 2008, 182). Despite this abolishment of the legal basis of discrimination, the *Shin Heimin* continued to face problems. In some cases their situation was worsened by becoming *Shin Heimin*, because the government effectively eliminated the monopoly they had once held over certain occupations such as shoemaking, leaving them vulnerable to competition that further exacerbated their poor economic condition. This change in their status also sparked violence against *Burakumin* by members of what were formerly the classes above them.

As Japan industrialized and modernized during the Meiji Restoration, the *Buraku* areas lagged in terms of education, communication, and transportation. This left the *Burakumin* in a poorer state than the rest of the Japanese, and even now most of them are more impoverished, less educated, and less healthy than other Japanese because of the persistent poverty and discrimination that they face (Samuel 2008, 183). This discrimination follows them even if they choose to move out of the *Buraku*, because Japan's *Koseki* (family register) paperwork requires them to report their hometown. The *Buraku* label on their *Koseki* papers leaves them vulnerable to discrimination in any situation where such papers are required, such as when applying for a job (Samuel 2008, 183). Companies have been known to circulate lists of known *Buraku* areas in order to blacklist potential hires from those places, and families have often hired private investigators to make sure that potential spouses are not secretly *Burakumin* who would "pollute" their family bloodline (Cangià 2012, 261; Sugimoto 2010, 206).

*Burakumin* have a long history of collective organization and political activism (Samuel 2008, 183-185). The most prominent group is the Buraku Liberation League, which has been responsible for many of the political gains of the *Burakumin*, including several "special measures" that included government financial support to designated *Buraku* areas (Sugimoto 2010, 208-09). These measures, along with the overall growth of the Japanese economy that

occurred in the post-WWII era, markedly improved conditions for the *Burakumin*. However, the “special measures” have incurred backlash from the majority Japanese. The *Burakumin* activists have always used rhetoric that cast the *Burakumin* as no different than other Japanese, so opponents reasoned that if they really were the same there was no justification for them receiving special treatment from the government. As a result of this argument, many of the “special measures” have since been dropped.

Today, *Buraku* areas are still home to their traditional leatherworking industries, but many also work in other “undesirable” occupations such as construction (Cangià 2012, 261). The ethnic makeup of the *Buraku* is changing as well, as ethnic Koreans, Chinese, and new migrants from other parts of Asia are moving to these marginalized industry towns to find work. In many cases, these foreign minorities face similar barriers to those of the *Burakumin*, though the historical reasoning is different. This has caused some impediments to community formation, as increasingly the people living in *Buraku* areas may not share the same historical ancestry that is generally cited as the source of their collective identity.

In any case, while there is little prestige and heavy stigma surrounding the work they do and the place they live, the services and goods provided by the *Burakumin* are needed by the rest of Japan. Community activism has capitalized on this fact, often by encouraging *Burakumin* children to be proud of the fine crafts that the *Buraku* industries create, such as leather bags and drums. Similarly, a boost in the popularity of “traditional” Japanese crafts and arts have allowed *Burakumin* to revive traditional cultural practices such as monkey training and special types of puppetry that were avoided for years because of the stigma. In both cases these cultural products are cast as being “traditional Japanese,” rather than as *Buraku*, strengthening claims to an “ordinary Japanese” identity (Cangià 2012, 362-64; 369-70).

The primary struggles of the *Burakumin* remain tied to economics and their relatively impoverished conditions. Their neighborhoods have chronically low property values, hindering efforts to move to nicer areas. They lack the funds to afford the private tutors and afterschool programs that could help their children get ahead in Japan's intense education system. The older generations don't have the education to seek out jobs in more respected industries. As Japan's economy continues to stagnate, opportunities for growth that could improve *Buraku* conditions remain elusive. They remain economically disadvantaged, geographically separated, and stigmatized by those outside.

### **Ainu**

The Ainu are historically Japan's most distinctive ethnic minority group. They live predominantly in northern Japan, though there are some living as far north as Russia and some further south into Honshu, and are traditionally a forager culture (Hanazaki 2001, 118). They never developed a unified political system, and thus they had trouble resisting intrusions by the more politically organized Japanese. A series of military conflicts occurred starting in the 1400s, which resulted in repeated losses by the Ainu (Hanazaki 2001, 117). The Ainu gradually came under the influence of trade and a wage-labor system that benefitted the Japanese, and thus their traditional culture had begun to erode long before their land, at the time called Ezo, was formally incorporated into the Japanese nation as the prefecture of Hokkaido (Hanazaki 2001, 118-20). Their long history of contact with the Japanese also resulting in a significant amount of intermarriage and subsequent mixed ancestry individuals, and at present very few "pure" Ainu individuals remain. Like with other indigenous populations, contact with the Japanese also reduced the Ainu population through the introduction of diseases.

Being a northern people, the Ainu are generally more stocky and hairy than their Japanese neighbors, and this phenotypical difference is often the means of identifying a person as Ainu (“Ainu” 2005). Given the history of intermarriage cited above, this visual identification can exclude many people who would consider themselves to be Ainu despite not “looking” Ainu. The visual distinctions are also more prominent in males. Ainu women formerly had very distinctive tattoos but these are no longer common.

Once made a part of the Japanese empire during the Meiji Restoration, the Ainu were subject to a variety of assimilation efforts (Sjöberg 2008, 199; Sugimoto 2010, 217). They were made to use Japanese names, wear Japanese clothes, and live in Japanese houses despite the deep religious symbols present in their traditional homes (Hanazaki 2001, 120). The schools set up for Ainu children taught them only Japanese, and thus the Ainu language fell out of use, with only a handful of people remaining who know more than a few words. The Ainu were also strongly encouraged to take up farming, despite them having no history and in many cases no interest in agriculture (Sjöberg 2008, 199). The 1899 Hokkaido Aborigine Protection Act was the centerpiece of this assimilation effort; it promised to give land and money for public works if the Ainu would take up farming and become self-sufficient, but the land they were given was poor quality and they were often not given as much as was promised, leaving them unable to sustain themselves. Many used a loophole in the law to lease their land to Japanese farmers and eventually they lost ownership of it. Overall, farming was less economically beneficial than the wage labor they had been doing as lumberjacks and construction workers (Howell 2004). Furthermore, those that refused to take up farming were given no aid. Like other marginalized groups, the Ainu are poorer and less well-educated than the majority population (Sjöberg 2008, 204).

While many of the Ainu happily assimilated, others sought to preserve their culture and advocate for more rights as an indigenous group. The global civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s prompted many Ainu to reach out to other indigenous groups and begin actively seeking more recognition from the government (Hanazaki 2001, 125; 127; Sjöberg 2008, 197). The Ainu were not legally recognized as an indigenous group until a 1997 court case over the building of a dam near the Ainu settlement of Nibutani (Maruyama 2012). In this case, the judge ruled that the Ainu had a right to enjoy their own culture and that the government had violated this right by not fully considering the impact of the dam they had built on the Saru River.

Official government estimates put the number of Ainu at 24,000, but this number includes only those living in known Ainu settlements in Hokkaido and thus excludes people who live in other cities or regions, as well as many people of mixed ancestry and those who choose to hide their Ainu background to avoid discrimination (Sugimoto 2010, 216-17). Other estimates suggest a total Ainu population of closer to 200,000. Regardless of these number, the Ainu are routinely cast by both the media and academics as a “dying culture” that has few remaining members, and many of the majority Japanese severely underestimate the number of Ainu and know little about their history or culture (Lie 2001, 46; Sjöberg 2008, 200). Efforts have been made by Ainu activists to create museums of Ainu culture as well as Ainu language schools, but their remains something of a debate over whether the museums and displays of traditional crafts are too “touristy” (Hanazaki 2001, 125-26; Sjöberg 2008, 199; 202-03; 209-10; 212). Authenticity debates aside, these efforts are often successful at keeping the younger Ainu engaged with their traditional culture, and they also serve to give peace of mind to the older Ainu who are worried about their culture fading away.

## **Ryukyu Islanders/Okinawans**

The Ryukyu Islanders, often called Okinawans after the largest of the islands and the name of the encompassing Japanese prefecture, were formerly an autonomous kingdom with a distinct culture. The Ryukyu Island chain stretches from the southern tip of Kyushu to Taiwan, with the largest island in the center, equidistant from both China and Japan (Pearson 2001). This geographical marginality kept the Ryukyu Islanders outside either country's domain, though they have a history of contact and trade with both. Ties with China helped give the Ryukyu monarch legitimacy and boosted the kingdom's maritime trade. The islands came under control of Japan's Satsuma domain in the early 1600s, but the kingdom remained somewhat autonomous to allow for trade to continue with China. The islands were formally annexed by Japan in 1879, at which time its ruling monarchy was dissolved.

With annexation came assimilation efforts, but these efforts were generally more gradual than those imposed on the Ainu in the north who lacked the Okinawan's political organization (Hanazaki 2001, 121). The primary means of assimilation was the government education policy, which included nationalist rhetoric and indoctrination into the emperor cult that promoted the unity of all people under Japanese rule. The Japanese schools also failed to teach the children their native language, though there was and remains today debate over whether native Okinawan speech is a separate language or a distant dialect of Japanese. The traditional native speech is largely unintelligible to majority Japanese, but some insist that it is merely a Japanese dialect, thus reinforcing the view that Okinawans are Japanese and thus should be controlled by Japan. The Japanese administration set Japanese as the standard language of business, media, and education in the prefecture, thus weakening the distinctive traditional speech. Gradually, Japanese cultural practices became more dominant.

From the outset Okinawa was perceived as something of a buffer zone between Japan and the surrounding countries, and this became especially poignant during the Pacific War. A third of the Okinawan population died when the United States invaded the islands in 1945, with a fourth of the population perishing at the Battle of Okinawa alone (Ueunten 2008). Many of these deaths were forced suicides, as the Japanese soldiers encouraged or outright forced civilians to commit suicide rather than be taken prisoner.

After the war and the subsequent occupation of Japan, the United States maintained control of Okinawa until 1972, using the islands to stage Cold War-era proxy wars in Asia (Hook 2010). During the U.S. occupation, many Okinawans activists used rhetoric tying the Okinawans to the Japanese in an attempt to convince Tokyo to advocate for the islands' return to Japanese control. Since '72, this rhetoric has fallen out of use as the Okinawans frequently feel that Tokyo is once again treating them as a buffer zone rather than as sovereign citizens (Hanazaki 2001). 75% of the U.S. military presence in Japan is located in Okinawa prefecture, and the citizens complain of the noise and pollution from the military activities, as well as the potential for accidents, such as when a U.S. military helicopter crashed into an Okinawan university classroom. There is also outrage over crimes committed against the Okinawans by U.S. servicemen, often against women and children, including high-profile kidnappings and rapes of Okinawan girls.

The response of the Japanese government and U.S. military leaders to these incidents and concerns has been largely insufficient and sometimes callous. The Okinawans have since begun emphasizing their historic ties with China and their status as Pacific Islanders, sometimes calling their chain "Yaponesia" to bring attention to their similarities to other Pacific groups (Hanazaki 2001, 129). Many politicians and activists have begun calling for more autonomy or outright

independence from Japan, and there are longstanding protests against military expansions on the islands that could threaten the safety and environment of its people.

Despite widespread opposition to the U.S. military presence and animosity toward the Tokyo government, the Okinawan economy is almost entirely bound to the military (via jobs on the bases or providing services to the personnel and their families) and to tourism from other parts of Japan (Taira 2008, 278-79). As much as they would like to have the bases gone, to do so would put many Okinawans out of work. The overall situation here is complex and varied, and no one solution will satisfy all involved.

## **Hāfu**

The term *Hāfu* refers to people of mixed Japanese ancestry. The term is predominantly used to refer to people of partially Western descent, and rarely applies to people who are partially Asian, such as Japanese-Koreans. Some see the term as being derogatory, arguing that it describes *Hāfu* as being somehow incomplete, but it remains the most commonly used term. Some have proposed the use of the term “Double” instead, but this label does not accurately describe the experiences of many *Hāfu* individuals (Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 286-89). Hyphenated ethnic labels, such as those used in the US, are not commonly used in Japan.

Experiences among *Hāfu* vary widely based on individual circumstances. One of the main factors is whether a *Hāfu* individual spent time in both parents’ home country (Murphy-Shigematsu 2008). Some are truly “Double,” having lived in Japan and their other home country, learning the culture and language of both. Others were raised solely in Japan, and may or may not have cultural ties to their other side. Still others were raised abroad, and may or may not have been taught Japanese at home. All of these people would have a different experience living in

Japan; a “Double” may miss out on some deeper cultural traits due to their switching back and forth but have an advantage due to their bilingual status, a Japan-only *Hāfu* may feel discouraged when people on the street constantly treat them as foreign, and a *Hāfu* who goes to Japan after living abroad may feel that they missed out by not engaging with their Japanese heritage earlier (Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 282-83).

While *Hāfu* have undoubtedly existed for as long as Japanese and non-Japanese people have been in contact with each other, the *Hāfu* boom, so to speak, began with the U.S. occupation of Japan at the end of WWII. Many of the women who married or had children with Americans were seen as somehow traitorous for “joining the enemy;” the loss of Japanese women to American men was considered to be another emasculating aspect of the occupation (Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 288-89). Acceptance in their Japanese families often hinged on how “Japanese” they looked, with those with dark hair and eyes having an easier time fitting in than those with lighter hair or darker skin.

In more recent years, the wartime stigma has faded, but there remains a notion of there being a “pure” Japanese standard and any *Hāfu* is a clear violation of this rule. They encounter problems simply because they are different, and the wide variety of circumstances surrounding them means that there is no clear way to categorize them and their experiences.

### **Zainichi Koreans**

According to government statistics, Japan has a population of around 400,000 ethnic Koreans, most of whom are second- and third-generation residents (Sugimoto 2010, 209). These Zainichi Koreans, or Koreans in Japan, vary in their level of connection to their ethnic homeland. Some attend Korean-language schools and participate in Korean community groups, while others

prefer to “pass” as Japanese by using Japanese names and language exclusively or while in public, taking advantage of the fact that they look no different from ethnic Japanese people (Kashani 2006, 181; 183; Kyo 2008, 57). For many of the Zainichi, their Korean identity only became significant when it was used to justify discrimination against them, most often in terms of marriage, housing, and jobs (Kyo 2008, 47; 59). Because Japanese citizenship is passed on through one’s parent’s citizenship, rather than by virtue of being born in Japan, these Koreans lack legal status as Japanese nationals, leaving them without many civil rights and protections. Their status as Korean is marked by their paperwork or lack thereof, which is why discrimination against them occurs in contexts like housing where they must show official papers (Sugimoto 2010, 211).

Koreans residents do have the option to become naturalized citizens if they choose, but historically this process required them to give up their Korean name, effectively telling them to abandon their Korean heritage in exchange for Japanese legal status (Sugimoto 2010, 211). This rule has since been changed, but some Koreans still refuse to naturalize based on principle; they still feel that to naturalize would be to abandon their Korean identity (Kyo 2008, 49). Many Koreans have naturalized throughout the years, but because the Japanese government does not collect data about the ethnic composition of its citizenry, once Zainichi Koreans naturalize and become legal Japanese, they are no longer counted officially as Zainichi Koreans (Sugimoto 2010, 209). Thus, the figure of 400,000 cited above is likely an underestimate, as it does not include naturalized Koreans or their descendants. It also fails to take into account individuals who are part Korean due to intermarriages with ethnic Japanese.

The Korean Diaspora in Japan began after Japan invaded and annexed Korea in 1910. Annexation made Koreans part of the burgeoning Japanese empire, and also granted them legal

status as Japanese subjects (Caprio and Jia 2009, 27; Kashani 2006, 169-72). Korea was less developed economically than Japan at the time, so some Koreans took the opportunity to migrate to the main Japanese islands to find jobs in Japan's flourishing industrial sectors. This out-migration was also encouraged by the fact that most of the prime farmland in Korea was being taken by Japanese settlers (Kashani 2006, 171).

Due to their lack of Japanese language ability and their perceived status of being inferior to Japanese, the work they did was in dangerous and unstable jobs such as mining and railroad construction (Kashani 2006, 172-73). These early migrants established networks based on kinship and regional identity, with many Koreans coming from the same parts of Korea settling together in Japan. Once established, these networks facilitated further migration along the same lines (Kashani 2006, 172).

Koreans in Japan faced discrimination and had limited economic prospects. After the 1923 Kanto Earthquake struck, Koreans in Japan were accused of poisoning wells in the aftermath, sparking a campaign of violence that left thousands of Koreans dead at the hands of xenophobic Japanese (Kashani 2006, 176-77). As the Japanese war effort expanded in later years, a massive labor shortage formed as most of the Japanese men joined the army. The Japanese government decided to fill the shortage by forcing Koreans to move to Japan to work (Caprio and Jia 2009, 27; Kashani 2006, 172). In addition to these forced laborers, many Korean women, as well as women of other nationalities, were forced to work as prostitutes for Japanese soldiers.

When the war ended and Japan lost control of its colonies, Koreans living in Japan lost their status as Japanese citizens (Sugimoto 2010, 211). Many Koreans, especially those forced to move to Japan, were eager to return, but a shortage of jobs, food, and housing in Korea kept

many would-be returnees in Japan where their prospects were somewhat brighter. Some of those who did go back later returned to Japan, spreading the news about Korea's situation among their neighbors. Rules set up for migration, including limits on the amount of money they could bring along, further hindered return migration (Caprio and Jia 2009, 21-22; 26; 28-29; 32; 35-38). The ideological split between North and South Korea also caused problems. Most Zainichi were from the geographic south, but many held leftist and communist sympathies and thus supported the North politically. Leftist Koreans would face imprisonment or worse if they returned to the South, and thus they opted to remain in Japan (Caprio and Jia 2009, 22-23; 30-31; 33). Overall, of the 2.3 million Koreans in Japan at the end of the war, 1.7 million returned and 600,000 stayed in Japan (Lie 2001, 24).

Koreans remaining in Japan had to choose between identifying as North or South Koreans, and this formed the basis of the two largest Korean community groups, the South-oriented *Mindan* (the Korean Residents Union in Japan) and the North-oriented *Chongryun* (the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) (Sugimoto 2010, 2010). These organizations form the basis of efforts to preserve the ethnic identity of later-generation Zainichi, often by operating Korean schools so that Zainichi children can learn the Korean language, history, and cultural practices. Korean families frequently promote in-group marriage and frown upon intermarriages with ethnic Japanese, but this attitude has been loosening among younger generations of Zainichi (Kyo 2008, 51-55; Sugimoto 2010, 212-13).

Koreans in Japan still face limited job prospects, with many of them remaining in the unstable manual labor sectors that their predecessors began in. Many opt to open their own businesses and become successful restaurant and pachinko-parlor owners (Sugimoto 2010, 215).

Recent nationalist movements have targeted Koreans specifically, as they are the largest minority group seen as foreign (there are technically more Burakumin than Koreans, but they are seen as essentially Japanese and thus are not as strongly targeted) (Sugimoto 2010, 215-16). Some nationalist groups protest the “special treatment” that Koreans receive and demand that they “go back” to Korea, despite the fact that most Zainichi have never been to Korea and speak little to no Korean. Those that do go to Korea find themselves still cast as outsiders due to their being linguistically and culturally Japanese (Kyo 2008). Neither fully Korean nor fully Japanese, the Zainichi find themselves caught between two identities and unable to claim either entirely.

Protests against the Zainichi often coincide with tensions between Japan and the Korean countries. One of the thorniest issues between the two is the wartime forced prostitution of Korean women, often referred to as “comfort women” (Lie 2001, 25). Japanese leaders have sometimes denied that the women were forced, causing outrage in Korea and in other countries that are home to victims.

Japanese leaders have also tended to downplay Japan’s aggressive actions during the colonial period, usually by saying that Japan was trying to modernize the rest of Asia and save them from Western domination (Driscoll 2009). High-profile leaders, including current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, have made calls for Japan to stop apologizing for the war and move on, despite the victims of Japan’s aggression calling for more sincere apologies.

### **New Migrants**

According to the official registry, Japan has a population of around 2 million foreign nationals, 1.63% of the total population. This number has been rising—the figure was 0.98% of the population in 1991 (Sugimoto 2010, 218-19). 74% of these foreigners are from other parts of Asia, and 18% are from South America. Of course, these numbers only count those who came to

Japan along official channels; missing from these figures are those that entered Japan illegally or who entered legally but overstayed their visas.

In Japan, there is a general divide between the “old migrants” such as the Koreans and Chinese whose ancestors came to Japan before or during the Pacific War, and the “new migrants” who have come to Japan since the 1980s (Sugimoto 2010, 219). The new migrants arrived as a result of Japan’s economic growth; as the Japanese people have become more affluent and the Japanese economy has expanded, there has been a growing shortage of labor in the blue collar “3K” sectors—jobs such as construction work that are *kitsui* (“difficult”), *kitanai* (“dirty”), and *kiken* (“dangerous”) (Lie 2001, 10). Japan’s rapidly aging and shrinking population worsens this problem, both because there are not enough new people entering the workforce and also because the growing number of elderly Japanese necessitates a larger number of caregivers and other medical staff (Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 8).

Some estimates state that between 380,000 and 600,000 migrants would need to come to Japan annually to maintain current population levels, but opposition remains from right-wing leaders who feel that such large numbers of migrants would alter Japan’s status as an ethnically and culturally homogenous nation (Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 7). Efforts to boost immigration are also hindered by public perception of Japan as a homogenous nation and a fear that bringing in foreign migrants could disrupt the “traditional harmony” of Japanese society.

The government, finding itself trapped between an economic need for increased immigration and public opposition to that potential increase, allowed for two “loophole” channels to allow for some migration (Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 7). One was a change in the migration law that allows the descendants of Japanese living abroad to migrate to Japan fairly easily. This has created a substantial population of *Nikkeijin*, mostly from South

America. The logic was that the *Nikkeijin*, who are ethnically Japanese, would be able to assimilate more easily than migrants from other countries (Sugimoto 2010, 221). This, however, proved not to be the case; the *Nikkeijin* are culturally and linguistically South Americans, and, like other migrants, due to their lack of Japanese language skill they find themselves stuck in the 3K sectors regardless of their educational background. The population of South American *Nikkeijin* has been declining in recent years, largely because the economies in their home countries are improving. Those still in Japan rarely agitate for an improvement to their marginalized position because they fear losing their “special status” within Japan’s migration law.

The second channel allowed by the government was the creation of the Technical Internship Trainee Program (Yamaga-Karns 1995). While this program is marketed as a way for foreign workers to gain skills, in reality it served to provide Japanese companies both large and small with cheap labor. Most of these trainees come from other parts of Asia, and because of their status as “students,” they lack the legal protections that other laborers have. Because of this, rights violations against the trainees are common, with many forced to work long hours at low pay, live in cramped company housing, and may have their passports or other IDs taken to prevent them from leaving the company. This is all after enduring a long wait to become trainees in the first place, and many of them take on significant debt in the process.

Furthermore, these trainees are not the only migrants subject to rights abuses. Like migrants to other countries, language barriers and other structural problems hinder migrants from seeking legal recourse for abuses (Sugimoto 2010, 220; Willis and Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 8). Many fear bringing attention to issues at all, for fear of being deported or revealing that they overstayed their visa.

At a more personal level, how individual migrants are treated in personal interactions is often dependent on how their home country is viewed in Japan. A person from Europe or the U.S. is seen as high class because they came from a rich country, while a person from the Philippines or Pakistan is seen as backwards or uneducated because they came from a third-world country (Lie 2001, 20-21). To cope with their situation, migrants frequently try to claim a Japanese identity; they will talk about liking traditional Japanese foods like *natto* that are unpalatable to most foreigners or liking Japanese music or sports teams (Onishi 2008). Others will identify more strongly with their home country such as by becoming more religious. Still others are caught between the two, unable to identify strongly with either. Those that return home to visit are often thought to have somehow abandoned their home and may face stigma.

The prevailing stereotypes about certain nationalities remain problems regardless of how things actually are. Chinese migrants are often linked to crime in the media, while women from the Philippines and Indonesia are cast as barmaids and other types of “entertainers” despite more of them coming to Japan to be the wives of farmers or to work in nursing and caregiving for the elderly (Lie 2001, 11-14).

### **The Consequences of the Monoethnic Myth**

Before and during World War II, Japan cast itself as the “big brother” of Asia. They were going to be head of the Greater East Asian co-prosperity sphere that was going to protect Asia from Western dominance (Lie 2001, 24). Everyone was welcome (albeit as colonies) but there was a clear effort to incorporate diverse people under the label of Japan (Befu 2008). That is not to say that there was not discrimination on the individual level by any means, but officially at least everyone was welcome.

After the war and the collapse of the empire, Japan folded in on itself. They were no longer the big, expansive eastern empire anymore. They were just a set of islands. They redefined themselves to fit their new role, and in this process they ignored the realities of multiculturalism that existed. They looked at countries like the United States that were “diverse” and decided that was not what Japan was (Lie 2001, 25-26). They cite race riots and protests in the U.S. and associate diversity with conflict.

Because many of Japan’s minority groups are invisible or pushed to the margins, the Japanese as a whole do not have to confront the diversity that exists because they cannot see it, or they choose not to. It will take a conscious effort of education—and of coming to terms with their past actions—before this can change. In all these cases acknowledging that minority groups exist would entail acknowledging that Japan wronged them, and that can be a hard thing for people to admit, both as individuals and as a collective government (Murphy-Shigematsu 2008, 285). Some small steps have been taken, and progress is not outside the realm of possibility. It will take work, and it will be uncomfortable, but it needs to be done.

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