

Vocalizing the “I” Word: Proposals and Initiatives on Immigration to Japan from the LDP and Beyond

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Summary

In recent years, various influential voices in Japan have proposed that the country open itself to immigration, in one form or another, as a partial solution to revitalize the economy, to prop up the demographic decline, and in recognition of already present streams of migrants who entered through “side” or “back” doors. Where will Japan go from here? This paper traces connections between developments in migration policy in recent years by examining relevant discourses on migration from government policy reports, interviews with bureaucrats, politicians and civil society organization representatives and other stakeholders. While pro-immigration voices are present, the prospect for any “opening up” of Japan remains murky, due in no small part to the failures evident in various policies that have been put forward up to this point as well as to the economic recessions of the past two decades, exacerbated by the disastrous earthquake and nuclear accident of 3/11. The “I” word remains contested.

Keywords: Japan, immigration policy, population decline, civil society organizations, multicultural coexistence, stakeholders

1. Introduction

At a conference at Meiji Gakuin University in 1995, a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) commented that Japan has no immigrants, only entrants. This statement more or less sums up Japan’s immigration policy in the post-war period. Although a number of side-door¹ policies have allowed foreigners to enter in various categories, there has never been a policy to encourage the long-term settlement and integration of foreigners as immigrants. Indeed, as Kiriro Morita and Toshio Iyotani argued in 1994, unlike advanced nations in Europe in the post-war period, Japan did not experience a labor shortage in building up its economy because the country used the excess labor from those Japanese citizens repatriated from the colonies, as well as from its own countryside. The *zainichi* Korean and Taiwanese populations also provided labor.² Yet by the mid-1980s, when Japan was

¹ Many scholars have pointed to government policies that have brought new immigration to Japan’s “side” door while not really opening the “front door.” See, for instance, Kondo (2005) and Vogt (2007).

² The term *zainichi* refers to Koreans and Chinese (and their descendants) who lost Japanese nationality in 1952 after the San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed but remained in Japan.