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Brian Gaynor

Muroran University, bgaynor@mmm.muroran-it.ac.jp

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Changing from within: Immigration and Japan

Brian Gaynor

Muroran University, Japan

bgaynor@mmm.muroran-it.ac.jp

Abstract

Although Japan's demographic decline is well known, the slow but steady increase in the country's immigrant population has been less acknowledged. Despite this continuing influx of foreigners the Japanese state still has no coordinated immigration policy that clearly addresses such issues as residency, employment, education, and access to social services. Rather it is at the local level that towns and villages all across the country are having to develop ad hoc responses to the growing number of foreigners resident in their communities. Hitherto most research into immigrants' lives has focused on what are known as 'diversity points', large urban areas with significant numbers of non-Japanese residents. However, the majority of immigrants live in small, ethnically dispersed communities spread across the entire country. This paper presents a case study of one such location, an industrial town in northern Japan.

Keywords: migration; Japan; multiculturalism; municipal government; language policy

Introduction

By now Japan's demographic decline is well known. The country is home to the fastest aging society in recorded history, while conversely its birthrate is among the world's lowest.¹ The Japanese Statistical Bureau has estimated that by 2020 the population will have decreased from its current figure of 128 million to 122 million, and by 2060 projects the figure to be 79 million.² This represents a loss of over a million people every year for 48 years. However, buried within these figures is a small but significant source of growth. Over the past two decades the number of non-Japanese residing in Japan has increased from 1.08 million in 1990,³ to 2.08 million in 2011, and they now account for 2.3% of the total

¹ World Bank: Birth Rate per 1,000 people 2002-2006. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CBRT.IN.

² National Institute of Population and Social Security Research: Population Projections for Japan (January 2012): 2011 to 2060. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.ipss.go.jp/site-ad/index_english/esuikei/gh2401e.asp.

³ Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications: Registered Aliens by Nationality and Status of Residence (1948-2009). Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.stat.go.jp/english/data/chouki/02.htm.

population.⁴ According to the UN's population estimate, Japan will have to increase this number by a total of 17 million if it wishes to maintain its current population.⁵

While small in comparison to immigration in demographically similar countries such as France (10.1%) and Germany (12.3%), nevertheless the increasing number of non-Japanese residents means that Japan is *de facto* a country of immigration.⁶ However, within national political discourse *de facto* does not yet equal *de jure*. There is still no coordinated immigration policy that clearly addresses such issues as residency, employment, education, and access to social services.

This is particularly evident at the local, municipal level. The federalist nature of the country's public administrative system ensures that it is local governments at town and city levels who are primarily responsible for administering those areas, such as education, health, social welfare, and public spending, that most impact on their residents' everyday lives. Local governments are also responsible for their non-Japanese residents as, with the notable exceptions of immigration and legal affairs, essentially all other interactions with the Japanese state occur at the municipal level. This in turn means that non-Japanese residents' interactions are as varied as they are geographically diverse; the experiences of a Nepali family in Shinjuku ward in central Tokyo, with nearly 34,000 registered foreigners,⁷ is going to differ considerably to what their fellow immigrants encounter in Muroran, a struggling industrial port city in northern Japan, which is home to only 288 foreign residents.⁸ Yet, it may well be that the latter is more indicative of the immigrant's experience particularly from the perspective of education. Hitherto most research into immigrants' lives has focused on what are known as 'diversity points', large urban areas with significant numbers of non-Japanese residents such as Hamamatsu in Shizuoka prefecture, Ota city in Gunma prefecture, as well as Japan's principal cities of Tokyo and Osaka.⁹ However, if we follow Burgess's admittedly imperfect proxy of immigrant children requiring Japanese

⁴ National Statistics Center: Tourokguikokujin toukei.

Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/List.do?lid=000001089591. It should be noted that this figure does not include undocumented or 'illegal' migrants of which there are estimated to be 59,000 (Ministry of Justice, January 2014). Accessed on 18/12/2014 on http://www.moj.go.jp/nyuukokukanri/kouhou/nyuukokukanri04_00041.html.

⁵ United Nations Population Division: Replacement Migration - Japan. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.un.org/esa/population/publications/RepIMigED/Japan.pdf

⁶ United Nations: International Migration 2006. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.un.org/esa/population/publications/2006Migration_Chart/2006Immig_chart.htm

⁷ Shinjuku City: Kuseijouhou. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.city.shinjuku.lg.jp/content/000111018.pdf

⁸ Muroran City: Gaikokujin tourokushazuu toukei. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.city.muroran.lg.jp/main/org3600/gaih2409.html.

⁹ Particularly detailed accounts can be found in Ryoko Tsuneyoshi, Kaori H. Okano & Sarane Spence Boocock (eds.): *Minorities and Education in Multicultural Japan*, London: Routledge, 2011; and Joshua H. Roth, *Brokered Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Migrants in Japan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.

language instruction as indicative of the dispersion of immigrant families across Japan, then 80% of schools and half of villages, towns and cities have four or fewer such students.¹⁰

Thus, locations like Muroran are statistically more representative of the experiences of immigrants with families than the more visible ‘diversity points’, yet have not garnered nearly as much scholarly attention as areas such as Hamamatsu and Ota.

The aim of this chapter then is to go some way to rectifying this dearth by presenting a case study of Muroran city and the experiences of its non-Japanese residents. In particular, I will focus on their interactions with the various administrative branches of the city’s government and highlight how, in lieu of a coordinated national policy for creating a multicultural Japan, such policies are *ad hoc* and passive rather than proactive.

In order to situate Muroran within the wider national context, I will begin with a necessarily brief overview of the ideological debate surrounding the concepts of ‘Japanese’ and ‘foreign’. I will then outline how this distinction, both historically and contemporarily, has been undermined by a consistent increase in multiethnic residents, resulting in a paradox between what the political state ‘imagines’ to be a homogenous Japan and what local municipalities know to be a diverse reality. In particular, I will examine the area of language provision to immigrants, particularly those with school-aged children, and show how the lack of a clear, practical policy in this area is merely storing up potential problems for the future. I then incorporate all these issues into my examination of Muroran and how the city and its non-Japanese residents interact. Following from this my conclusion will reiterate the main argument; that the seemingly deliberate indifference at national level to the incipient multiculturalism at local level continues to thwart the lives of those non-Japanese who have made their homes here, and ultimately prevents Japan from realizing the full potential of all its citizens, a potential it can ill afford to spurn.

Japan’s monocultural myth

Despite Japan’s pressing need to do something to alleviate the country’s accelerating demographic decline, no political will to address the issue of immigration policy is currently in evidence. As Gottlieb pointedly notes, “while the closed country *sakoku* policy ended long ago, its intellectual baggage has lingered to a considerable extent in national discourse”.¹¹

¹⁰ Chris Burgess: ‘(Mis)managing diversity in non-metropolitan public schools: the lack of state-sponsored support for ‘newcomer’ children’. In: Tsuneyoshi et al., *Minorities*, p. 191.

¹¹ Nanette Gottlieb: *Language Policy in Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. X.

Much of this ‘baggage’ has taken the form of *Nihonjinron*, literally ‘what it means to be Japanese’.¹² For much of the past three decades, *Nihonjinron* has constituted a key discourse through which various aspects of Japanese culture, society, and language have been formulated.¹³ The proponents of *Nihonjinron* portray the Japanese language as somehow uniquely different from other languages and conflate language with ethnicity, based on mutually reciprocal definitions of both terms.¹⁴ Despite clear evidence to the contrary, they endorse what former prime minister Taro Aso described as Japan’s unique standing as the only country in the world having “one nation, one civilization, one language, one culture and one race”.¹⁵ It is Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ taken to an extreme.

Gottlieb rightly describes this ideological position as a “monolingual myth”, but, as she adds, it is an enduring myth, “what we might call [one of] the foundation myths of modern Japan”, and one that continues to influence official language policy. The continued promulgation of this myth also obscures the contemporary existence of large ethnic communities from Korea, China, Brazil, the Philippines and other countries; the historical existence of the indigenous languages and cultures of the Ainu and Ryukyu peoples; and the increasing number of international marriages between Japanese citizens and non-Japanese.

Research in this area has consistently shown a clear dichotomy between the practical necessity of accommodating immigrants at the local level, and the continued opaqueness of policy at the national level. At the state level where official language policy is determined and enacted, there is still no comprehensive policy framework that takes into account the national language, minority languages, indigenous languages and foreign language learning. Rather, as Gottlieb points out, official language policy is formulated and administered within separate areas with rigidly defined briefs, none of them devoted to community languages.¹⁶ For Liddicoat, this official passivity towards incipient multilingualism is evidence of the continuing pernicious effect of the *Nihonjinron* discourse.¹⁷ However, others¹⁸ present

¹² Yoshio Sugimoto: *An Introduction to Japanese Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

¹³ Nanette Gottlieb: Japan: Language Policy and Planning in Transition. In: *Current Issues in Language Planning* 9/1 (2008), p.1-68.

Anthony Liddicoat: Internationalizing Japan: Nihonjinron and the intercultural in Japanese language-in-education policy. In: *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 2/1 (2007), p.32-46

¹⁴ Harumi Befu: *Hegemony and Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron*. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2001

¹⁵ Japan Times: Aso says Japan is a nation of ‘one race’. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on <http://www.search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20051018a7.html>

¹⁶ Gottlieb, Japan: Language Policy and Planning in Transition, p. 2.

¹⁷ Liddicoat, Internationalizing Japan.

¹⁸ Cf. Yoko Butler: Foreign Language Education at Elementary Schools in Japan: Searching for solutions amidst growing diversification. In: *Current Issues in Language Planning* 8/2 (2007), p.129-147. Cf. Yasuko Kanno: *Language and Education in Japan*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.

evidence of the increasing development of “bottom-up language planning”,¹⁹ a natural response, perhaps, to what Hornberger terms the ‘ecology of language’.²⁰ Gottlieb cites the case of Miyagi Prefecture, which in 2007 became the first local government to draft by-laws (written in Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean and Portuguese) to officially promote multiculturalism.

Yet, encouraging as such initiatives are, they must be contrasted with an ongoing ‘stasis’ at the national level. For a national language policy to be formulated that encompasses both Japanese and community language speakers, it is necessary to determine what languages are spoken, and by whom. Yet, such data is not collected. The most recent census, in October 2010, despite being available in 28 different languages, contained no questions on respondents’ language use or ethnicity.²¹

Migrants in Japan

Current immigrant statistics are indicative of the historical trends that have shaped Japan’s reluctant multicultural development. Ethnic Koreans make up the largest ethnic group, followed by Chinese, Brazilians, Filipinos and Indonesians (see Table 1 below). Rather than ethnic origin alone, however, such groups are usually discussed in terms of their historical precedent, being commonly termed indigenous, oldcomer and newcomer.²²

Table 1: Foreign Residents in Japan as of 2011²³

Country of Origin	Figures	%
China	674,871	32.5%
Korea (North and South)	545,397	26.2%
Brazil	210,032	10.1%
Philippines	209,373	10.1%
Peru	52,842	2.5%

¹⁹ Gottlieb, Japan: Language Policy and Planning in Transition, p. 34.

²⁰ Nancy Hornberger: *Continua of biliteracy: An ecological framework for educational policy, research and practice in multilingual settings*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003.

²¹ Japanese Statistics Bureau: 2010 Census Form. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.stat.go.jp/english/data/kokusei/pdf/census.pdf.

²² Ryoko Tsuneyoshi: ‘The ‘Internationalization’ of Japanese Education and the Newcomers: uncovering the paradoxes’. In: David Blake Willis and Jeremy Rappleye (eds.): *Reimagining Japanese Education*. Oxford: Symposium Books, 2011, p.107-126.

²³ National Statistics Center: *Tourokugaikokujin toukei*.

Country of Origin	Figures	%
USA	49,815	2.4%
Other	336,150	16.2%

Indigenous minorities refer to the Ainu, the native peoples of Hokkaido in the north of the country; and the Ryukyu people from what is now Okinawa, at the very south of Japan. Both of these regions were annexed during the Meiji expansion of the late nineteenth century, and are now considered within official discourse as fully assimilated Japanese (there was, for instance, no Ainu or Ryukyu ethnic category on the most recent census form).

‘Oldcomers’ refers to ethnic Koreans and Chinese, descendants of former colonial subjects who either moved or were forcibly relocated to Japan during the country’s colonial period. However, as Okano and Tsuneyoshi point out, the automatic labelling of all ethnic Koreans and Chinese as ‘oldcomers’ tends to obscure the diversity within this group conflating recent migrants with historical immigrants from the early to mid twentieth century. Citing the example of Koreans, they note that “there are said to be almost as many Japanese nationals of Korean (or mixed Korean) descent as Korean residents. The identification of nationality with ethnicity, a long held assumption in post-war Japan, is therefore contested.”²⁴

The term ‘newcomers’ refers to the influx of immigrants who entered Japan from the late 1970’s to the present. Again, diversity belies the catch-all phrase of ‘newcomers’; they include such groups as Indochine refugees, war-displaced returnees from China, migrant labourers from Asia, spouses of Japanese citizens and, in particular, the influx of South Americans of Japanese descent. Known as *Nikkeijin*, they came to Japan in sizable numbers following the revision of the immigration law in 1990.

A final category could be added here, that of ‘transient migrants’. Japan’s demographic decline is fuelling an ever increasing need for labour in low-paid menial jobs. In addition, the country’s institutions of higher education are trying to offset the fall in enrollment of Japanese students by attracting more overseas students. Yet, both plans fall foul of the strictly utilitarian approach the state adopts towards immigration. The majority of immigrant labourers who work in agriculture and manufacturing do so on restrictive, limited term ‘training schemes’, which are in essence a source of cheap labour as the immigrants,

²⁴ Kaori H. Okano and Ryoko Tsuneyoshi: ‘Introduction’. In: Tsuneyoshi et al., *Minorities*, p.8.

ostensibly ‘trainees’, are paid considerably less than equivalent full-time Japanese employees.²⁵ Similarly, strict visa rules preclude foreign students from seeking work in Japan once they graduate - rather they are expected to return to their home countries.

‘Japanese and Alien’

Prior to July 2012, all foreigners resident in Japan were legally obliged to register with their local government. This system was known as *gaikokujin toroku*, which was officially translated as ‘alien registration’.²⁶ In all its dealings with immigrants, the State has always striven to maintain this dichotomy between Japanese and non-Japanese, a purposeful divide that even extends to the learning of the Japanese language. In the formal education system Japanese students study *kokugo*, literally ‘the language of our country’. Foreigners, in contrast, learn *nihongo*, ‘the language of Japan’. Hashimoto refers to this as “the emotional struggle with foreignness”, but such linguistic distinctions have wider implications.²⁷ Non-Japanese are categorised in official discourse as *gaikokujin*, ‘foreigners’, who, by this definition, are ‘outsiders’ within the concept of the nation-state. As we have seen, Japan does not permit dual nationality so what Tsuneyoshi terms “hyphenated Japanese”, such as Korean-Japanese or Filipino-Japanese, do not officially exist.²⁸ Thus third generation ethnic Koreans who were born and raised in Japan and speak only Japanese are regarded as foreigners, unless they naturalise, in which case they become ‘fully’ Japanese. For Tsuneyoshi this is evidence of “how the defining of border or boundaries between who is Japanese and who is not intertwines with what is ‘imagined’ (Japan as homogenous), and what is ‘real’ (the emergence of a pool of ethnic Japanese)”. He rightly terms this “a paradox...that Japan can be seen as monocultural and multicultural at the same time”.²⁹ Yet, this is not a benign paradox; this deliberate othering has important ramifications for ethnic minorities in all aspects of their lives in Japan, be it in terms of education, work, social services, medical care, or pensions.

To give but one example of many: In 2005 the supreme court ruled in favour of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government who barred the promotion of a second generation ethnic Korean

²⁵ Jeff Kingston: *Contemporary Japan*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

²⁶ Immigration Bureau of Japan. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.immi-moj.go.jp/newimmiact_1/en/index.htm

²⁷ Kayako Hashimoto: ‘Implications of the recommendation that English become the second official language in Japan’. In: Andy Kirkpatrick (ed.): *Englishes in Asia: Communication, Identity, Power and Education*. Melbourne: Language Australia, 2002, p.69.

²⁸ Tsuneyoshi, *Internationalization*, p.116.

²⁹ Tsuneyoshi, *ibid*, p.117.

(whose mother is Japanese) to a public sector management position. As a public health nurse it was extremely improbable that she would be promoted to a position deemed sensitive to national security, but the court upheld the city's argument that non-Japanese should not be permitted to exercise public authority. As Kingston acidly observes, "the senior civil service is, like some dodgy nightclubs and bath[houses], Japanese only".³⁰ Similar restrictions have been experienced by foreign academic staff at Japanese universities who have been denied tenure because of their nationality.³¹ As Tsuneyoshi ruefully concludes: "the image of foreigners as outsiders, as people who come and go, is very strong; outsiders are never really perceived as equal members of the community or society."³²

Language and Immigration

What these minority groups represent though, is a visible challenge to the hitherto reflexive views of national homogeneity, both linguistic and ethnic. The presence of migrant communities makes various demands on both national and local governments. This is particularly true of language. The fact that Japanese is not an international language like English and little used outside of Japan means that the majority of immigrants, particularly 'newcomers', do not speak Japanese upon arrival, "making the provision of JSL (Japanese as a Second Language) classes a key social issue as immigration continues to grow".³³

Figure 1: Number of non-Japanese children in public schools requiring assistance in Japanese language instruction

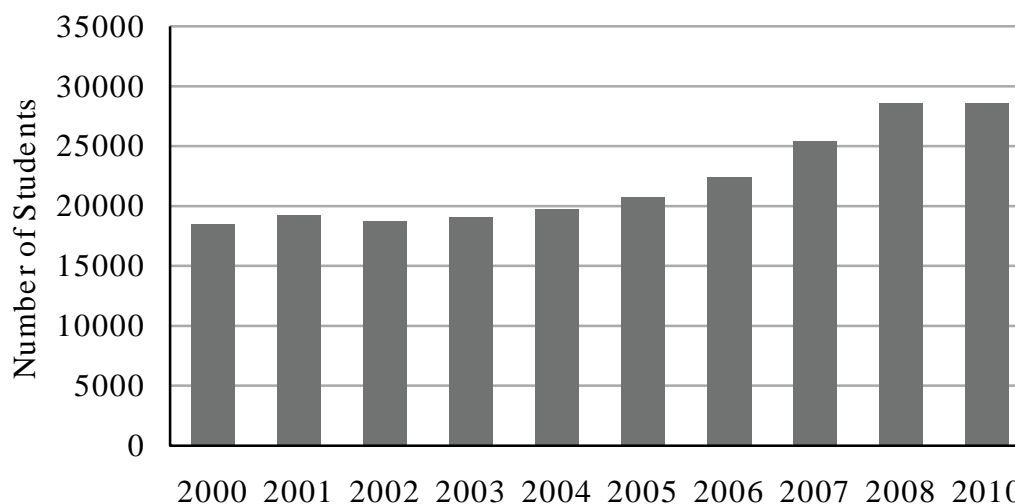
³⁰ Kingston, *Contemporary Japan*, p.170.

³¹ Akira Kuwamura: The Challenges of Increasing Capacity and Diversity in Japanese Higher Education Through Proactive Recruitment Strategies. In: *Journal of Studies of International Education* 13/2 (2009), p. 189-202.

³² Tsuneyoshi: *Internationalization*, p.118.

³³ Gottlieb, *Language Policy in Japan*, p.34

Besides nationality, the only other notable data the Japanese state collects on its ethnic



minorities are the number of children requiring assistance in Japanese language instruction.

The number of such children has been increasing annually and currently stands at 28,511 (see Figure 1).³⁴ Yet, even this figure is problematic; there is no clear, official definition of the

term ‘requiring assistance’, judgement usually being left to the individual schools. In addition, once students are adjudged to have reached a certain level of Japanese (though again, such criteria are not specified), they are no longer included in the official statistics.

Burgess also makes the point that such evaluative criteria usually only gauge students’ competence in basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS - see Cummins, 1981³⁵).³⁶

Such language skills are quite different from cognitive academic language proficiency

(CALP), which is necessary for progression in educational settings and takes considerably longer to obtain.³⁷ The result is that “although the ‘problem’ of language and acculturation to

school life is often considered solved after a year or so, in fact such students increasingly fall behind, unable to participate in or follow what is going on in class”.³⁸

Such an *ad hoc* approach to JSL provision and assessment in lieu of a coordinated language in education policy for minority language students can thus have a detrimental affect on their

³⁴ Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT): nihongo shidou ga hitsuyona gaikokujin jidousei no ukeire joutaito ni kan suru chousa (heisei 22 nendo) no kekka ni tsuite. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/23/08/1309275.htm.

³⁵ Jim Cummins: Empirical and theoretical underpinnings of bilingual education. In: *Journal of Education* 163/1, p.16-29.

³⁶ Chris Burgess: ‘Diversity in non-metropolitan schools’. In: Tsuneyoshi et al., *Minorities*, p.193.

³⁷ Cummins, Empirical, p. 16-29.

³⁸ Harumi Ota: Nyuukama gaikokujin no kodomo no kyouiku kadai. In: T. Miyajima and T. Kajita (eds.): *Gaikokuroudousha kara shimin he: chiki shakai no shiten to sadai kara*, Tokyo: Yuuhikaku (1996), p.128.

education and future roles in society. As Gottlieb cogently argues, “the most pressing policy issue is without doubt the need to provide nationally sponsored opportunities for JSL education for foreign residents ... [as] it makes sense in the interests of present and future harmony to ensure that they are linguistically proficient in the language of the host society in order to enable them to act independently within it.”³⁹ However, the current situation demonstrates just how distant that prospect remains. There are still no officially recognised teacher-training courses in JSL at universities, no official language assessment tests for determining the language proficiency of JSL students, and, not surprisingly, no coordinated national education policy for providing students with systematic curriculum in JSL. As Tegtmeier Pak has pointed out, the formulation of an immigration policy based on control rather than assimilation means that any initiatives that do occur only do so at the local level.⁴⁰ It is here, in the cities, towns and villages across Japan, where various forms of assimilation take place. Local governments are the administrative bodies who must deal first hand with the integration of foreign residents into their communities. While this involuntary devolution of responsibility to those branches of the state most directly in contact with ethnic minorities does enable a more nuanced approach to differing local conditions, it also means that geography rather than need can determine the quality of JSL assistance minorities receive. The largest concentrations of minorities are found in Japan’s manufacturing heartland centred around the country’s three largest cities, Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. It is here that the most noteworthy progress towards multiculturalism can be found. Tsuneyoshi cites the case of Oizumi city, near Nagoya, where 16% of the city’s population are non-Japanese, most of them immigrants from South America. To meet the linguistic and cultural needs of this sizable minority, the Oizumi Board of Education has established JSL classes for both children and parents, and provides a range of educational and social support systems for immigrants.⁴¹ In Kawasaki city south of Tokyo, the local government has established ‘multicultural coexistence’ (*tabunka kyousei shakai*) as one of its municipal goals, where diversity is respected and people of different nationalities, cultures and ethnicities can ‘coexist as autonomous citizens’.⁴²

³⁹ Gottlieb, *Language Policy in Japan*, p.124.

⁴⁰ Katherine Tegtmeier Pak: *Towards Local Citizenship: Japanese Cities Respond To International Migration*. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.ccis-ucsd.org/PUBLICATIONS/wrkg30.PDF

⁴¹ Tsuneyoshi: *The ‘Internationalization’ of Japanese Education and the Newcomers: Uncovering the Paradoxes*. p.115.

⁴² Kawasaki shi: *Kawasakishi no tabunka kyousei shakai suishin shishin - tomoni ikiru chiiki shakai shakai o mezashite*. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.city.kawasaki.jp/250/page/0000040959.htm

As welcome as such initiatives are, unfortunately they are still the exception rather than the rule. If we consider the statistics of children requiring JSL instruction as an approximate indicator of the geographical distribution of minorities across Japan, then we find that almost 80% of schools and half of local municipalities have four or fewer of such students.⁴³ In other words, locations such as Muroran are statistically much more representative of the experiences of non-Japanese children (and by implication their families) than concentrated communities in large urban areas. Therefore, location clearly plays a significant part in determining the nature and quality of JSL instruction and other necessary services to minority residents. Highlighting this, Oga and Abe found that in those parts of Japan with few JSL students there is a corresponding lack of urgency about the provision of JSL education, and, moreover, many schools and teachers do not have the training or resources to provide an effective JSL program.⁴⁴

It is worth noting here the contrast with English as a foreign language (EFL) education, particularly at the primary level. In Muroran, for instance, all of the teachers are non-specialists in EFL but they can draw upon a preplanned curriculum and supplied teaching materials, and are offered regular in-service training courses. In addition, the city employs three native speakers of English as assistant English teachers who work in tandem with the Japanese primary teachers in the classrooms - all this despite the fact that English is not an academic subject and thus not formally evaluated, nor is there any literacy education for the Japanese students. In fact, English is not even compulsory; the official title of the course is 'Foreign Language Activities' (*gaikokugo katsudo*) and thus in theory any foreign language can be taught. In practice, though, it means English, a situation replicated throughout Japan even in areas like Oizumi and Kawazaki. It is not therefore a lack of resources *per se* that inhibits the implementation of JSL programmes, but rather how the available resources are allocated.

Muroran-shi: A case study

Muroran is an industrial port town of 93,000 inhabitants located in Hokkaido, the northernmost of the four main islands of Japan. Akin to the country as a whole, its population is both declining and aging rapidly, with those aged 65 or over accounting for close to a third of the total. Nevertheless, as with the national trend, the number of foreigners resident in the

⁴³ MEXT: nihongo shidou ga hitsuyona gaikokujin jidousei no ukeire joutaito ni kan suru chousa (heisei 22 nendo) no kekka ni tsuite.

⁴⁴ Kyoko Oga and Jiro Abe: Development of academic language proficiency in Japanese as a second language. In: *Journal of Hokkaido University of Education* 60/1 (2009), p.87-95.

town, although a very small minority, has experienced an incremental but consistent increase, from 196 in 1990 to the present total of 288.⁴⁵ There are two main reasons for this: first, Muroran hosts two large steel mills and increased demand from overseas, particularly China, has led to an increase in the number of foreigners being employed by the mills and in related industries. The second impetus comes from the ongoing efforts by the city's university, Muroran Institute of Technology (MIT), to attract more foreign students. Currently there are 100 foreign students enrolled at the university full time, accounting for 35% of the city's total number of resident foreigners. Finally, it should also be noted that the city does not record ethnic data so that children of marriages between foreigners and Japanese citizens are registered solely as Japanese.⁴⁶

Space does not permit an in depth analysis of foreigners' lives in Muroran; rather, I will divide my analysis into an examination of four public administrative bodies that have the most significant influence on non-Japanese residents' day-to-day lives in Muroran. These are: the City Office, the International Exchange Centre, Muroran Institute of Technology, and the city's Board of Education. Interwoven into my analysis will be the accounts of non-Japanese residents' experiences and encounters with these institutions. These accounts are taken from an ongoing ethnographic study I am conducting into the lives of ten foreigners and their families living in the city. I commenced my study in the autumn of 2010 and so far I have conducted 48 semi-structured interviews, averaging 73 minutes each. The interviews were conducted in either English or Japanese (or sometimes both) with respondents at six month intervals.

The Muroran City Office

Under Japanese law all non-Japanese who reside in the country for more than 90 days must register with their local municipal office. In Muroran this process occurs at the *tousekijuminkai* (the family register department), where there is a section for foreign residents. Necessary forms are available in English, Chinese and Korean; the staff at the counter speak some English but no other languages. Matters relating to daily life in the city, such as applying for utilities, social welfare assistance, rubbish collection, etc., are dealt with at the *shiyakusho*, the city office, which is housed in a separate building. Besides the registration process, all other administrative matters are conducted solely through Japanese.

⁴⁵ Muroran City: Gaikokujin tourokushazuu toukei. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.city.muroran.lg.jp/main/org3600/gaih2409.html.

⁴⁶ As a result there are no available statistics on such numbers, but by my incomplete estimation, there are at least 33 children of 'mixed ethnicity' living in the city.

Residents requiring bilingual assistance are expected to bring someone with them who can act as an interpreter.

Besides visiting these offices in person, residents, both native and foreign, can access much of the information via the web as Muroran, like most municipalities, has an extensive online site. However, information in English, Chinese and Korean is made available via a ‘machine translation’ by Google, with a disclaimer acknowledging the limitations of such a service. Although somewhat helpful, the English translation is of variable quality and depends on the clarity of the original Japanese page.⁴⁷ For instance, information on the city’s rules regarding rubbish disposal is rendered into fairly comprehensible English, whereas the more detailed information about applying for child allowance is unfortunately rendered unintelligible. Carroll has emphasized the need for accuracy in translations which in turn requires either original material produced in the foreign language(s), or a skilled human translation of the Japanese original.⁴⁸ To these criteria I would also add the need for comprehensiveness. This refers to the need for additional information to be provided to foreign residents so that they can understand the seemingly common-sense, shared cultural and social knowledge that Japanese residents possess such as the rules regarding rubbish disposal or paying residency tax.

Unfortunately, as a report published by the Kokusai JP group noted, such human translations are costly and time consuming, and it would be unrealistic to expect Muroran city to accurately translate their entire website into multiple languages, particularly as much of the content needs to be updated regularly.⁴⁹ Rather, as the Kokusai JP report recommends, in situations like Muroran’s a combination of manual translation for important pages and machine translation for the rest is probably the most feasible alternative.

Muroran city and ‘international relations’

In 1986 national legislation was enacted compelling each municipality to establish an International Exchange section (*kokusai kouryuuka*) and an International Exchange Association (*kokusai kouryuukyokai*). These bodies were charged with providing information about their localities to overseas visitors, organising ‘international’ themed cultural events, organising homestay programmes, and other types of ‘cultural diplomacy’.

⁴⁷ For the purposes of this paper I have chosen the Japanese - English translation as my own foreign language limitations preclude me from commenting on the accuracy of the Chinese and Korean translations.

⁴⁸ Tessa Carroll: Local Government websites in Japan: International, Multicultural, Multilingual? In: *Japanese Studies* 30/3 (2010), p.373-392.

⁴⁹ Kokusaika JP: Toukyou-to ku-shi-chou-zon webusaito no tagengoka taiou joukyou chousa. Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.kokusaita.jp/images/kjp/info/web-i18n-tokyo-lg.pdf.

Muroran city duly established the Muroran International Communication Promotion Council in 1987 which, at the time of writing, lists fifty local associations, ranging from businesses to elementary schools, supporting its activities. On its homepage the Council lists as its principal activities “environment and culture of foreign countries lectures”, “cooking classes by foreigners”, “beginning Chinese and Korean lessons”, “cultural guidance for foreign students at MIT”, and “local homestays for MIT and other foreign students”.⁵⁰

In 1995 an International Community Centre was established in order to provide a focal point for the Council’s activities. According to the director of the centre its main activities are predominantly focused on “cultural exchange”, explaining Japanese culture to foreign residents and in turn inviting them to introduce their home countries to Japanese residents of Muroran.⁵¹ While the centre does provide volunteer interpreting and translating the director emphasized that these were usually only offered to tourists and foreign homestay students. Translation and interpretation of administrative matters relating to foreign residents’ lives in Muroran are not part of its remit.

This was made clear by the experiences of a Nepalese resident who, in 2010, wanted to open a restaurant in the town. He approached the International Community Centre seeking advice on how to go about opening his business, but was informed that the centre did not undertake such roles. When he asked if there was anybody who could accompany him to city hall and act as (Japanese-English) translator, he was given the contact details of a professional translator in the city. Somewhat ironically a year later, after he had successfully opened his business, he was asked by the centre if he would give a demonstration class on cooking Nepali cuisine.

Muroran Institute of Technology (MIT)

MIT currently has 100 foreign students; 40 undergraduates, 44 postgraduates, and 16 doctoral research students. For degree courses all undergraduate students must have obtained level 2 or above in the Japanese language proficiency test. For postgraduate students the requirements differ on the qualification being sought; for master’s students they need “to have sufficient ability in Japanese” though this isn’t specified, whereas for doctoral students there is no Japanese language requirement.⁵² These varying language requirements thus result in considerably different learning and living experiences depending on the academic

⁵⁰ Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.city.muroran.lg.jp/main/org1260/suisinkyougikai.html.

⁵¹ Personal communication.

⁵² Accessed on 23/10/2012 on www.muroran-it.ac.jp/oia/cir_en/admissions.html.

qualification been sought. Whereas foreign undergraduate students have the language skills to effectively adapt to college life and interact with their Japanese peers, this is not necessarily the case with postgraduate students. Indeed, some of them may possess little more than basic communicative Japanese as their research is conducted entirely through English. Furthermore, research students tend to be older (the average age is 31) and some of them have brought their families to Muroran while they undertake their studies. This in turn requires a lot more interaction with the various administrative branches of Muroran city, which isn't necessarily the case for undergraduate students.

The university has a Centre for International Relations which oversees the affairs of all foreign students enrolled in the university, though their remit only goes so far. Although not explicit, interviews with both the staff at the centre and foreign students with families make it clear that there is a *de facto* separation between what the university considers to be its responsibilities, and what is the domain of the individual students. The centre concerns itself primarily with enrollment, academic performance, accommodation and visa matters; issues to do with dependents, such as education, medical care, and part-time work, are the responsibility of the individual students.

The experience of P., a graduate student from Indonesia, is a case in point. She enrolled as a doctoral student in the university in 2007 and graduated in the spring of 2013. She was accompanied to Japan by her then one-year-old daughter while her husband remained at his teaching job in Indonesia. Initially her Japanese ability was not particularly strong, but she had been assured by the university that this would not be a problem as her research (and academic supervision) would be conducted in English. While this, for the most part, turned out to be the case the situation was considerably more problematic vis-a-vis her daughter. P. successfully enrolled her in a local nursery school but found the ongoing communication with her daughter's teachers quite stressful. In particular, the constant paper stream of notices, forms and flyers were extremely time-consuming to translate and reply to. In addition, unexpected events such as illnesses and trips to the hospital were further instances of stress and worried incomprehension. Throughout all this she received minimal assistance from the centre who cited privacy concerns as their reason for not getting involved more. A further issue had to do with her scholarship funding. Her monthly living expenses were paid for by the town's Rotary Club, but this in turn entailed regular involvement by P. in the organization's activities. The centre was anxious not to undermine their relationship with the Rotary Club as they funded scholarships for a number of foreign students at the university, and so pressurized P. into attending the club's activities. However, most of these activities

took place in the evening which meant a babysitter had to be found for her young daughter, usually one of her fellow students.

What P.'s case highlights is the aforementioned lack of policy coordination between national and local authorities. Whereas the Ministry of Education has set a target of enrolling 300,000 foreign students in Japanese tertiary institutions by the year 2020, there have been no related policy initiatives detailing how municipalities like Muroran can best manage such students, particularly those that come to Japan with their families.

Muroran Board of Education (BoE)

According to the most recent statistics, there are currently 99 ethnic minority students enrolled in public primary and secondary schools in Hokkaido who need Japanese language assistance.⁵³ According to the Muroran Board of Education, there are no such students in the city.⁵⁴ In fact there are, but their circumstances and the lack of a clear, standardised definition of what 'Japanese language assistance' is, means that they slip through the official policy cracks into a zone of administrative ambiguity.

The students in question are the daughters (7 and 9) of an Egyptian doctoral candidate at the university. They are enrolled in the local elementary school in first and third class respectively. They have both been in Japan for three years, but in this time have only acquired basic communicative Japanese and the rudiments of literacy. As their father intends to return to Egypt following the completion of his studies (most likely within the next year), neither the girls' teachers nor their parents are too concerned about their lack of Japanese language development. As a consequence there is no specific JSL instruction provided to the girls and they are not expected to maintain their language abilities to the same level as their Japanese classmates. This though, as their teachers admit, has hampered their learning of other academic subjects so that it is not only in Japanese, but also in maths, science and social studies that they lag behind their peers. For their parents the expectation is that they will 'catch up' when they return to Egypt, but as studies in similar situations have shown this does not necessarily ensue.⁵⁵

The factors giving rise to this situation are both political and practical. The former relates to the lack of an effective national policy that has structures and programmes in place which

⁵³ MEXT: nihongo shidou ga hitsuyona gaikokujin jidousei no ukeire joutaito ni kan suru chousa (heisei 22 nendo) no kekka ni tsuite.

⁵⁴ Personal communication.

⁵⁵ Guadalupe Valdez: Between support and marginalization: The development of academic language in linguistic minority children. In: *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 7/2-3 (2004), p.102-132.

students, their parents, and their teachers can readily access. The practical refers to the difficulty, particularly the financial difficulty, of Muroran BoE, in lieu of a national policy, designing and implementing its own JSL programme.⁵⁶ Given the city's perilous finances and the competing demands made on its educational budget, it would be extremely difficult to justify the cost of such a programme to tax-paying residents. Similar reasons are proffered for the BoE's inability to promote multiethnic education. The result therefore is default assimilation with children, regardless of ethnic background, expected to conform to the educational requirements as set down by the Japanese state. This though involves issues wider than mere language. Following the revision of the Fundamental Law of Education in 2006, elementary and junior high school education now includes mandatory classes on patriotism, and teachers are required to evaluate their students' 'love of their country'. That some students may 'love' another country in addition to, or even besides, Japan may seem to be a mere political oversight, but, I would contend, such a need to explicitly 'teach' patriotism derives from a deeper, latent insecurity at the country's ongoing ethnic diversification.

Conclusion

The small number of non-Japanese living in Muroran should not obscure the fact that they are still residents of Japan and they are, in fact, indicative of the diversity that can be found throughout the country. Hitherto, much of the academic and media attention has been directed at places such as Tokyo, Shizuoka and Kanagawa that have large resident populations of particular ethnic groups. Yet, conversely such attention has overshadowed less ethnically visible areas like Muroran that do not have sufficient foreign residents to justify local measures to accommodate such diversity. The onus is therefore on the state to instigate a coordinated policy that takes account of not just legal issues of immigration and residency, but also involves education, social welfare, health care, employment, and ultimately a clearly defined roadmap for acquiring citizenship.

The unstoppable force of demographic change and the resulting need for immigrants, however reluctantly acknowledged, means that Japan finds itself having to deal with issues of loss and gain: the loss of an imagined homogeneity and assumed shared heritage versus the clear economic gains and cultural enlightenment that comes with the presence of foreign residents in local communities. As Gottlieb has pointed out, "the old ideology of

⁵⁶ Personal communication.

monoethnicity and monolingualism with its binary distinction between ‘Japan’ and ‘foreign countries’ no longer works. Residents of these ‘foreign countries’ have come to Japan, often not to stay for a while and move on but to settle, and the social fabric of Japanese communities has been changed as a result”.⁵⁷

The task now is for the Japanese state to recognise the varied ethnic and linguistic realities at the local level, and instigate a clear national policy that not only recognises and responds to the needs of the country’s increasing number of foreign residents, but also takes advantage of all the talents and skills such residents have to offer.

⁵⁷ Gottlieb, Language Policy in Japan, p.162.