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Thesis Prospectus

A Call to Multiculturalism?
Japan's Labor Shortage and its Challenge to Japanese Identity

Research Question/Overview:

Japan, as of 2011, appears to be reaching a turning point in its economic and social identity. With the most quickly aging population in the entire world, and one of the lowest birthrates, the country faces mounting labor challenges.¹ What this may mean for Japan is that, in addition to a variety of domestic economic reforms, it will be forced to relax its strict immigration laws in order to attract a labor force from abroad. This is not only a challenge in terms of legal reform, but also in terms of societal change.

The objective of my thesis is to investigate the mentalities of young Japanese, especially university students, with regards to the presence of foreigners and minorities in Japan. In the face of a severe labor shortage, will Japan be able to overcome what was described in 2005 by an investigator working for the United Nations as “deep and profound” racism?² Will Japanese identity be able to shift from being defined largely on the basis of race to incorporate multidimensional aspects of identity such as culture and language? Finally, what shifts can we already observe in Japanese university students?

¹ Kyung Lah, "Japan: Economy slips to third in world," [CNN](#) 14 February 2011.

² Chris Hogg, "Japan racism 'deep and profound'," [BBC News](#) 11 July 2005.

Background:

In the face of labor shortages in 1990, Japan attempted to remedy the problem by making an exception to its stringent immigration laws. The government encouraged Japanese-Brazilians to come to Japan to work. As Onishi states, "With their Japanese roots, names and faces, these children and grandchildren of Japanese emigrants to Brazil would fit more easily in a society fiercely closed to outsiders, or so the reasoning went."³

What is most interesting to me is the fact that the reasoning behind this exception seems to have been primarily, if not solely, based on race. Many of the Japanese-Brazilians encouraged to enter Japan had little to no knowledge of Japanese culture or language, yet were nonetheless accepted by the Japanese government because of their ancestry, unlike many resident (*zainichi*) Koreans whose families have lived in Japan for generations.

I am interested in how -- or indeed whether -- Japanese society will be able to adapt to what will likely be an increasing presence of racially non-Japanese people.

Data/Methodology:

I will be using primary sources, including Japan's Ministry of Labor Statistics, to investigate employment figures and birth rate.⁴ I plan to utilize the transcripts of original Japanese-language speeches given by politicians in Japan with regards to this issue, as well as news articles that have not yet surfaced in English-language

³ Norimitsu Onishi, "An Enclave of Brazilians Is Testing Insular Japan," The New York Times 1 November 2008.

⁴ Labour, and Welfare Ministry of Health, Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 12 September 2011 <<http://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/>>.

news sources; I have so far read one article of relevance from Asahi Shimbun that discusses a Foreign Minister's resignation after having accepted funds from foreigners (who were, in fact, *zainichi* Koreans living in Japan, which makes the author's use of the word "foreigner" somewhat questionable).⁵ In using and translating Japanese sources, I believe that I will be able to make a contribution to current English-language scholarship on the issue.

Additionally, I plan to conduct my own survey of Japanese university students using questions that will investigate their concepts of Japanese identity and their perceptions of foreigners and minorities in Japan. I hope to use contacts at Ritsumeikan University in order to administer this survey, and may also ask the Japanese students studying at the University of Mississippi to participate as well. I may also conduct interviews with Japanese students if possible, which will give me the opportunity for more in-depth discussions of the issues I will be evaluating through the survey. In Appendix A, I have attached a current draft of these survey and interview questions, which will be translated into Japanese before they are administered.

Secondary sources will include existing scholarly writing on theories of identity formation, as well as writings that deal with the current status of minorities, especially *zainichi* Koreans, in Japan. The reason I am focusing primarily on *zainichi* Koreans rather than other minorities in Japan is that *zainichi* Koreans, unlike, for example, Westerners, tend to be able to "pass" among Japanese, yet despite often

⁵前原氏、外国人献金計59万円 4人と1社から、アサヒコム・ホームページ <http://www.asahi.com/politics/update/0827/TKY201108270173.html> (2011年9月12日アクセス)

speaking Japanese more fluently than they speak Korean, despite having lived in Japan for generations, and despite sometimes identifying more with Japanese culture than with Korean culture, these *zainichi* Koreans are still seen as “outsiders” in Japanese society.⁶ In other words, if a group of people that appears to have overcome the biggest hurdles in being accepted into Japanese society is still maintained in the Japanese consciousness as “other” (as non-Japanese) it begs the question of whether this acceptance is a possibility at all. This sentiment is echoed in the *New York Times* article discussing Japanese-Brazilians:

To make itself an attractive destination for immigrants, the experts say, Japan will have to undergo a difficult cultural transformation for which the Japanese-Brazilians pose an elementary test case. If even they cannot gain acceptance, what chance will there be for immigrant groups that may be ethnically, racially, religiously and nationally different from native Japanese?⁷

Because of their cultural and linguistic identification with Japan, I would argue that even more than the Japanese-Brazilians discussed above, one might expect *zainichi* Koreans born and raised in Japan to be accepted by Japanese society, yet they are not. For this reason, I would like to use the situation of *zainichi* Koreans as a case study potentially applicable to other groups of foreigners and minorities in Japan.

⁶ John Lie, "Zainichi Recognitions: Japan's Korean Residents' Ideology and Its Discontents," [The Asia-Pacific Journal](#) (2008).

⁷ Norimitsu Onishi, "An Enclave of Brazilians Is Testing Insular Japan," [The New York Times](#) 1 November 2008. Norimitsu Onishi, "An Enclave of Brazilians Is Testing Insular Japan," [The New York Times](#) 1 November 2008.

If possible, I am also interested in reading work dealing with a genre of literature in Japan known as Nihonjinron. Burgess describes this as “an extremely diverse genre of writing discussing Japanese (cultural) uniqueness.”⁸

Preliminary Findings/Hypothesis:

Hudson and Aoyama conducted a survey similar to mine in Hokkaido, asking Japanese university students questions regarding their own identity, and found that university education appears to be changing perceptions of minorities such as the Ainu people.⁹ Their findings indicate that, at least among these undergraduate students, “long-held prejudices against Ainu people are undergoing subtle changes.”¹⁰ I am interested to see whether similar changes might be occurring among my research subjects, who will be university students primarily from the Kansai region of Japan.

Based on my own experience in Japan, I believe that it is possible that Japanese identity may be slowly becoming more inclusive; especially among university students with whom I attended classes, it seemed to become less and less of a surprise that I, a foreigner, was able to speak Japanese, likely because these students were exposed to foreigners on a daily basis. However, some interactions I had with Japanese people suggest that many prejudices still linger, even among the younger population; countless Japanese people, assuming I could not speak any

⁸ Chris Burgess, "The 'Illusion' of Homogeneous Japan and National Character: Discourse as a Tool to Transcend the 'Myth' vs. 'Reality' Binary," The Asia-Pacific Journal (2010).

⁹ Mark J. Hudson and Mami Aoyama, "Views of Japanese Ethnic Identity Amongst Undergraduates in Hokkaido," The Asia-Pacific Journal (2006).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Japanese based on my appearance (some Japanese apparently actually believe that the ability to speak Japanese is a genetic trait), often spoke about me loudly on trains. As a foreigner born in the United States, despite my ability to speak a certain amount of Japanese, this was in some ways understandable. Yet I wondered what life is like for people not racially Japanese who grew up in Japan speaking only Japanese, and only knowing Japanese culture.

I predict that university students will show a certain degree of fluidity in their concepts of Japanese identity, possibly even allowing for the sort of “hyphenated” identity (e.g., Hungarian-Japanese, Korean-American) that is widely understood in the United States.¹¹ Yet I predict that the results of my survey will show that a certain degree of prejudice still lingers.

¹¹ John Lie, "Ordinary (Korean) Japanese," Koreans in Japan: Critical Voices from the Margin, ed. S. Ryang (New York: Routledge, 2000) 197-207.

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Appendix A

Written Survey

Part I: Note: Survey respondents will not be provided with the footnotes shown here to explain the ethnicities of the people in the questions; they are shown here for clarification of the purpose of the research.

Please answer the following questions.

1. Are you familiar with singer Hamasaki Ayumi?¹²
 - a. If yes, do you consider her to be Japanese?
2. Are you familiar with singer Miyavi?¹³
 - a. If yes, do you consider him to be Japanese?
3. Are you familiar with baseball player Suzuki Ichiro?¹⁴
 - a. If yes, do you consider him to be Japanese?
4. Are you familiar with rapper Verbal from the band M-Flo?¹⁵
 - a. If yes, do you consider him to be Japanese?
5. Are you familiar with Nissin Foods founder Ando Momofuku?¹⁶
 - a. If yes, do you consider him to be Japanese?
6. Are you familiar with singer Crystal Kay?¹⁷
 - a. If yes, do you consider her to be Japanese?
7. Are you familiar with actor Kaneshiro Takeshi?¹⁸
 - a. If yes, do you consider him to be Japanese?
8. Are you familiar with model Anna Tsuchiya?¹⁹
 - a. If yes, do you consider her to be Japanese?
9. Are you familiar with politician Marutei Tsurunen?²⁰
 - a. If yes, do you consider him to be Japanese?

¹² Japanese

¹³ Half Zainichi Korean, half Japanese

¹⁴ Japanese living in the United States

¹⁵ Third-generation Zainichi Korean

¹⁶ Taiwanese who lived in Japan

¹⁷ Born to an African American father and a South Korean mother, raised in Japan

¹⁸ Half Ryukyuan, half Taiwanese

¹⁹ Half Japanese, half Polish-Irish-American

²⁰ Finnish-born man (no Japanese heritage), first foreign-born European in Japanese parliament

10. Are you familiar with singer Utada Hikaru?²¹
a. If yes, do you consider her to be Japanese?

Part II:

Please indicate your degree of comfort with the following situations on a scale of 1 (extremely uncomfortable) to 6 (completely comfortable).

A community of Zainichi Koreans lives in your city or town:

1 2 3 4 5 6

A family of Brazilian-Japanese lives next door to you:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your boss at work is from China:

1 2 3 4 5 6

A Zainichi Korean family lives in a house next door to you:

1 2 3 4 5 6

A person from Taiwan asks you on a date:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your boss at work is from Thailand:

1 2 3 4 5 6

A Zainichi Korean is in one of your classes in college:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your family hosts a white American study abroad student:

1 2 3 4 5 6

A person from America asks you on a date:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your sibling or close friend marries a Thai person:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your family hosts an African-American study abroad student:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your roommate is a Zainichi Korean:

²¹ Japanese singer, born and raised in New York

1 2 3 4 5 6

A Russian is in one of your classes in college:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your roommate is a Brazilian-Japanese person:

1 2 3 4 5 6

A Russian asks you on a date:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your sibling or close friend marries a Zainichi Korean:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your roommate is from China:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your family hosts a study abroad student from Thailand:

1 2 3 4 5 6

A Brazilian-Japanese person asks you on a date:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your boss at work is a Zainichi Korean:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Your sibling or close friend marries an African-American:

1 2 3 4 5 6

Part III:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your ethnic identity?
3. What is your gender?
4. Where is your hometown?

Interview

Demographic information:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your ethnic identity?
4. Where is your hometown?

Research questions:

5. What do you think it mean to be Japanese?
6. Are you familiar with politician Marutei Tsurunen?²² If so, do you consider him to be Japanese? Why or why not?
7. Are you familiar with politician Haku Shinkun?²³ If so, do you consider him to be Japanese? Why or why not?
8. Are you familiar with Shigenori Tougou?²⁴ If so, do you consider him to be Japanese? Why or why not?
9. As you may know, the extremely low birthrate in Japan may cause problems with the workforce in the future. How do you think this might be resolved?

²² First foreign-born Japanese from Europe to serve in the Japanese Parliament

²³ Half Korean politician in the Democratic Party of Japan

²⁴ Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs in the 1940s, of Korean descent