

“Coming Back” to Japan

The Nikkei Workers

by Montse Watkins

They look like Japanese, but they have a different culture and a different way of thinking... And most of all, they do not want to be Japanese. But for the Japanese government, things look different. They want, at least on the surface, for Japanese society to be monochrome. Their labor policy, too, encourages this mono-ethnicity. The author of this report on “foreign Japanese,” Montse Watkins is a journalist from Spain.

History repeats itself. A hundred years ago, many Japanese emigrated to South American countries in order to escape the poverty of their lives in Japan. They dreamt of making their fortunes there. Now, their offspring, especially “*niseis*” (second generation) and “*sanseis*” (third generation) Japanese-Brazilians and Peruvians, have begun an exodus back to Japan. They are giving up their lives in those politically and economically unstable South American countries.

In addition to attracting these people back to their parents’ country, Japan’s prosperity has also generated a labor shortage and strengthened the yen. This is one of the decisive factors in this u-turn phenomenon; foreign workers are wanted in Japan’s workplaces as unskilled labor, and they respond to this demand.

In June 1990, the Japanese government revised its Immigration Law, making it legal for these *Nikkeis* (Japanese descendants) to work as unskilled laborers. Even before the enactment of the new law more than 60,000 Japanese-Brazilians were working in Japan, but in the time since it took effect, their numbers have mushroomed.

Today, at least 150,000 *Nikkeis* live in Japan. Nearly 80% are Brazilian, 10% are Peruvian, and the rest are mostly Bolivian or Argentinian. They are largely concentrated in six prefectures: Kanagawa, Tochigi, Gunma, Saitama, Shizuoka, and Aichi.

Their lives in this modern El Dorado, however, have never been easy. They have experienced a series of problems, including language problems, culture shock, discrimination and loneliness, as well as family discord. In addition, they have been cheated by the brokers who run travel agencies in their home countries and by the firms that wait to receive them.

The Japanese Labor Shortage

Japan suffers from a chronic labor shortage. In 1990, 310 companies went into bankruptcy because of a lack of employees. By September 1991 this number had jumped to over 400. However, this situation has been a bonanza for companies organizing job placements for foreign workers. In many cases the networks between Japan and other countries have been built by *yakuza* groups or by people associated with the gangs. The businesses they started resemble human-trafficking companies, and the victims of these schemes have long been increasing among foreign workers.

The portion of their salary taken away by the brokers is not the only problem facing foreign workers. Troubles are frequent because they are often totally ignorant of their own rights and duties regarding their visa periods and extension procedures, salaries, working hours, and housing expenses. When they do run into trouble, they often don’t demand an explanation for fear of being considered trouble makers. The brokers, in conspiracy with labor-hungry companies, take deductions from foreign workers’ salaries for the “repayment” of traveling expenses. Even after these “repayments” are finished, the brokers refuse to return passports to the workers, fearing that they will move to other companies offering better working conditions.

Generally, these kinds of problems don't occur in large companies such as automobile or electrical appliance manufacturers. This is because these companies offer foreign workers similar working conditions to those given to their Japanese workers. In smaller companies, on the other hand, problems are very common. There have been cases of workers fleeing their workplaces and then being captured and taken back against their will. Some have met unnatural deaths: one worker was killed in a traffic accident, and another fell off a railway station platform, dying of a skull fracture. Jurio Hokuhamu, a 23-year-old Peruvian, died under mysterious circumstances. His company's boss claimed the young man "fell to his death from a balcony while he was taking photographs."

Death rates are high among Nikkeis working in Japan. The Brazilian Embassy reported that 22 of its nationals died here in 1990. The leading cause of death is actually heart attacks, mainly among workers under the age of 25. A total of 36 lives had already been lost by January 1991. However, these figures are almost certainly underestimates. An official from one Latin American embassy admitted that less than half of the workers from his country are registered as workers. This makes it impossible to ascertain the total number of those who have died throughout Japan. The number of victims described above, 36, appears to be nothing more than a number that floated to the surface—no one knows the truth.

In 1990, more than 70 Brazilians were either killed or lost limbs in workplace accidents. Nikkeis tend to do excessive overtime work in order to boost their earnings, and this makes them careless—and causes accidents. In many cases, their lack of skill, inexperience, and inability to handle the Japanese language contribute to the dangers involved in their jobs. In addition they often operate machines without understanding how to deal with them. It has been reported that a worker in a car factory was killed when he mishandled a robot.

Companies, for their part, have done their best to stop these facts from being made public. One of the major transportation companies has publicly denied the existence of any Nikkei workers in its workplace—despite the fact that it employs at least 300 Peruvians in a paper manufacturing company it established. These companies hate to see any mention of Nikkei workers in the mass media.

They are naturally fearful that the facts concerning their use of these workers will be made public; one firm even fired a Nikkei worker because he was interviewed by the media.

Life in Japan

A group of auto factory workers recently returned to their home country penniless. They earned money in Japan, but spent all they had made on electrical appliances, clothing, as well as the prostitutes they had visited and alcohol they had consumed in order to escape from the stress of their jobs and lives in this society.

Many of the workers spend their weekends seeking solace in Colombian prostitutes who speak their language. They enjoy meeting these women in the pubs—places with a Latin taste but under gangster ownership. As these pubs have flourished, an increasing number of female Colombians have come into Japan. But as the workers drink, their frustrations easily burst into flame. Sometimes they fight using pieces of broken glass or knives.

Troubles also occur in their neighborhoods. Japanese housewives living nearby know that the workers are of Japanese origin, but they still complain that they are "noisy, dirty and don't care about how they throw away their garbage." One worker said that he had so many problems with landlords that he'd been forced to move about twice a year.

The Nikkei workers face a very difficult situation in this "El Dorado," yet it is even more serious for the foreign workers from Latin America who aren't, but who pretend to be, Nikkeis. Their numbers are growing along with the increase in "real" Nikkeis. There are at least 500 today, and they are also victims of evil brokers.

These people come mainly from Peru. In that country, the word "*koseki*" (Japanese for village registers) has entered into the local language. *Kosekis* are the documents that can prove a person is truly of Japanese descent. Brokers deal in Nikkei *kosekis* with advertisements that appear in the Lima newspapers everyday proclaiming "We sell Japanese-Peruvian *kosekis* for \$2000."

One indigenous Peruvian borrowed money from his relatives in order to buy a \$2000 *koseki*. He found a job working in a factory in Kawasaki, but

after only 8 months of working in Japan, he had a severe nervous breakdown and had to return to his country with the little money he had earned. As soon as his fellow Nikkei workers found out that he was a pretender, they stopped talking to him. They were afraid that the truth would put them in a difficult situation themselves. In the past, Japanese-Peruvians were looked down on and called "*Chino*" (originally a Spanish word for Chinese), but their position has changed along with Japan's rise to economic power. A sign of this change is that the *koseki* business is booming.

This is the situation that led the Nikkei workers in the factory to hate the "pretender" Indian—they considered him an invader of their own Nikkei identity. When he left Japan, he said, "I am accustomed to poverty. It isn't worth working in Japan, even in order to make money, if you have to experience the horrible discrimination that I felt. Now I am again poor in my country, but I want to live in a society where people are treated equally."

Another Peruvian pretender came to work in a small Japanese company on the orders of his broker. Two weeks later, the broker suddenly told him to flee the factory, telling him (falsely) that the police were coming to the workplace. The man was never paid for the two weeks he had worked. After leaving the place, he went to another company, again following the orders of the broker, and the working conditions were even worse than in the previous one. He was paid, but a very small sum. He had no recourse, however, for he feared that if he complained he would be sent somewhere even worse. The broker had taken his passport, and he was living in an apartment owned by the broker. In effect, he had no choice about where to work.

This is the situation that the "pretenders" face. In the past, some have taken refuge in their embassies and asked for special one-way passports. These people returned to their home countries, only to be faced with debts that they would never be able to repay.

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In another case, a Japanese-Brazilian woman arrived at Narita Airport accompanied by her husband. On board the plane were five other men to whom she was supposed to pretend to be married, so that each of them could enter the country. When the six men, including her real husband, were caught and interrogated at immigration, she gave up, confessed and told them which one was her real husband. The immigration officers, however, said that they didn't trust her, and simply deported all six men on the next plane. As a result, she was admitted to the country alone.

The Immigration Bureau at Narita Airport works in full knowledge of the intentions of the Japanese government. Since the revised Immigration Law came into force in June 1990, the problems

of Nikkeis and pretenders have come to the surface. The Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs and Labor tried to feign ignorance for about a year, but when they realized that they wouldn't be able to keep the problems under wraps, they hastily established an "Employment Service Center for Nikkeis" in August 1991.

The Employment Service Center advises Nikkeis in both Spanish and Portuguese on matters of daily life in Japan such as job seeking, recruitment and employ-

ment. In the first 45 days following its opening, the Center dealt with 214 employment, 568 job-seeking, and 260 recruitment cases. However, the Nikkei workers complain about the inflexibility of the office: the office isn't open on weekends (when the workers have free time), and the workers aren't free when the center is open (regular business hours). The Center defends itself by complaining that its budget is too limited to allow an extension of business hours.

According to two non-government groups, Convenjo de Cooperacion, which provides advice to Peruvians, and CATLA, which does the same for Brazilians, workers generally visit their offices on weekends. This means, potentially, that the number of people seeking advice may be many times greater than the number that has

actually been able to get advice.

The Japanese government's purpose in its 1991 revision of the Immigration Law was to regulate the number of unskilled laborers from abroad. However, the situation has gotten more rather than less serious, and it is clear that the government will have to reconsider the revised Law in a few years. Japanese society is "greying," and the industrial structure can no longer survive without the help of foreigners, especially young ones in the field of unskilled labor that is known as the "three Ks"—dirty, hard and dangerous.

This phenomenon is already a reality. What is needed now is to offer information to foreign workers and to give them training in the workplace, including providing Japanese language lessons. We will have to understand that we cannot have the same expectations of these people as we have of Japanese workers, because they are not Japanese. Without facing these facts, we will find it difficult to justify employing foreigners.

We are in the era of internationalization. One local government, however, has published a statement saying that Japan lacks the infrastructure, and is still too immature to accept foreign workers. Economic assistance is not the only way for Japan to contribute to the world. By providing foreign workers with on-the-job training, Japan can help them to return home with skills that they can develop later in their own countries. In addition, if they enjoy their lives in Japan, they may in the future play a role as private friendship ambassadors at a citizen's level.

Japan cannot continue to ignore the fundamental human rights of workers from abroad. To do so would be suicidal for its own economy. ■

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**Nikkeis in an assembly plant
in Nagano**

Photo by:
Shinanomaiichi Shimbun

Life as a Ghost

A Poem by an Iranian migrant worker

In life some things can only be understood through love and pain.

It may interest you to know something of a ghost's feelings. Of course, ghosts have many feelings but only some may be understood by those who haven't really died yet.

When I came to Japan I expected to learn about a new world. I also expected to have some problems but I never thought I would have to undergo what I did.

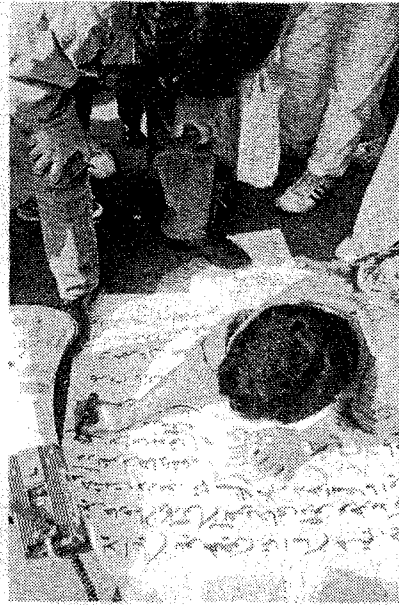
I was dead, a ghost who can see, hear and feel but who was not seen or noticed by anyone else.

Working in Japan has changed my life so much. I have lost my life while I've been here but I've had to stay. Before I could talk with anyone else my visa expired, and then I was stuck here.

I realized I might even lose my identity. Dead people first lose their lives and then their identity. Nobody pays any attention to them. Nobody needs them. They have nothing to give society and so they have no place in it and, worse, nobody can bring them back to life.

I had nothing in society. Without any affection it could not affect me. How could I feel alive? The only people who needed me worked for the company that made me work so hard for such low wages. When I was among people I was just a spectator, watching their lives, watching them laughing, thinking, walking, talking, reading a book or a newspaper. I was outside them.

I was judged to be dead because I wasn't here legally. Because my very life was unlawful, people thought I couldn't respect the law. When your



Putting complaints on the street

your life is unacceptable to others, you don't need to learn to speak or write one of the most difficult languages in the world. A ghost doesn't need it. I needed it but I couldn't do it.

An English language newspaper planned to publish something about workers' problems. I wrote something for it. At least I expected to see something accurate about the situation here but they only talked about one issue. The only thing they said was that people got homesick. But you have to have at least some happiness before you have the

luxury of feeling homesick.

I know lots of problems face people who work hard here and nobody can deny this. They just can't write about these deaths.

When I think about it, I can't help feeling a ghost is better off than me. Nobody can see or harm a ghost. It doesn't have any feelings and it lives in peace. When people caused me trouble I put up with it but it stayed in my mind and I kept on counting the days until I could get out of my grave.

Now I've almost gotten used to the life here, like someone who's been in cold water for a long time. You get used to it after a while or maybe you just forget the pain after having spent such a long time with it. Like others I am dead in this society and I don't want to be alive anymore just because I feel I don't need life any more. Besides I trust in myself, I study on my own and enjoy that and sometimes, to broaden my experience, I talk with other people. But most, if not all of this, is only an attempt to forget the pain I can't cure. ■

Foreign Workers in a Racist World

By Oda Makoto

Oda Makoto was one of the organizers of Beheiren in 1965, and is a well-known novelist. His novel Hiroshima has been translated into English as The Bomb. He was involved with AMPO at the earliest stages of the magazine's development during the Vietnam War.

The recent changes in Eastern Europe culminating with the fall of the Berlin Wall have given birth to a new era in the world. The destruction of the Wall has broken down the East-West Cold War confrontation and provided the world with the possibility of a future of disarmament and non-violence. However another equally important post-war structure, the unequal and unbalanced North-South relationship remains unchanged.

Moreover, since the Gulf War, not only has the North got more powerful, its claims to righteousness also seem much stronger. President Bush declared the "New World Order." Japan is not and cannot be an outsider in these developments. As one of the North's richest countries, it is, together with the US and Europe seeking to bring about this "New World Order." But what role is Japan expected to play and what role does it want to play?

Germany

In 1989 the "Neo-Nazis emerged as a sizeable political power in the January elections for the parliament of West Berlin. They arrived on the political scene advocating a "pure" Germany and wanting to get rid of such "foreign" elements as 'Gastarbeiters' (guestworkers), the majority of whom come from non-European countries like Turkey. Economic difficulties and social disorder had been

caused, they insist, by the intrusion of these non-German, non-European elements into their society which should be more purely German.

Right after the 1989 elections, German racist sentiments surfaced again in its 'western' part which was supposedly more 'enlightened' than the 'east.' I went to Berlin at that time and met an Asian friend who was working as a taxi driver. I found him unusually depressed. He said Fascists were now appearing everywhere. He often heard conversations in the back seat such as "Commies have to go first, then Arabs, then Turks and Asians." And he was often asked: What are you? After getting physically harassed from the back seat, to avoid such troubles he began to say that he was Japanese. In his apartment, he now felt fearful as Fascists were now living both upstairs and downstairs. They were always threatening him and his family with big dogs yelling: "Get out of this place, you foreign Asian bastards!" I asked him when those Fascists had moved in. His reply surprised me: No, they had been in the same apartment for a long time. They had just changed after the election. My friend later moved to a new apartment with his family.

The harassment of non-Europeans is not limited to East Germany. It continues and happens throughout Eastern Europe and the European part of the Soviet Union. And in Western Europe are things any better? My Asian friend in Berlin observed that nationalistic sentiment among the German population seeking the 'purity' of their society has got stronger after the 'unification' of Germany. German nationalism looking for a 'purer' Germany went along with 'European nationalism' which insists upon establishing a 'purer' Europe restraining by any means possible the further 'intrusion' of non-European elements. My friend and

his wife who has worked as a nurse, confessed their fear about the future direction of German society for the first time during their long stay in Germany and other parts of Europe over the last 30 years.

"Europeans, including Germans, now really seem to believe, and they are afraid, that they would be poorer if the Third World got any more power" was one of the conclusions he had drawn from the back seat conversations. And since the Gulf War he and his wife have been ever more fearful; they are Muslims.

Foreign Workers

There are many kinds of arguments about foreign workers, but the basic argument is crude and simple. The richer North needs the labor of the poorer South, and the poorer South needs the money of the richer North. Foreign labor is needed to make the richer North still richer. The quality (dirty, hard and dangerous) and quantity of the labor is decided in accordance with the needs of the richer North. These are some of the basics of foreign labor and they are quite similar to those of the North-South relationship.

There are really many kinds of arguments. Some insist: no more foreign workers, we need a "purer" Europe. Some hold that their work is still necessary and so they can stay, but they have to go after making their money. Others argue we should tolerate their presence in our society providing they don't exceed 10% of the population. If and when their number exceeds 10% and becomes 20% or 30% of the population, Europe will be Europe no longer.

If it is a 'pure' Europe the neo-Nazis want, everything is logically simple, even if it's impossible, for it is just a continuation of the old Europe of racism and domination over the weaker others, mainly non-Europeans. If it is a 'Europe with 10% of different elements,' they have to find a way to maintain the 'other' population at 10% as well as some kind of justification for doing that. Finally, if it really is a new Europe which boldly takes up different elements and envisages a new kind of future for Europe, we should ask what principles and values will be the bases of this entirely new Europe.

To ask these questions is to ask similar ques-

tions about the "new world" conceived by President Bush. Perhaps it will be a 'new world' based upon the continuation, surely strengthened, of the unequal and unbalanced North-South relationship. Or the "new world" could be the "10% different new world." In this world, the South could have a say, politically, economically and culturally in world affairs, up to 10%. A more radical view of the 'new world' envisages a world in which everyone stands on an equal footing, despite many differences, sharing happiness and misfortune together, contemplating the betterment of life and the world together. But what principles and values would be the bases of this entirely "new world," and how can we create it?

When I ask these questions concerning the new Europe or the "new world," I am asking similar questions about Japan—its foreign labor, its attitudes towards foreign workers, its discrimination and racism, its relationships with the countries of the 'Third World', and its vision of the future of the world.

Foreign Labor in Japan

As an economic giant Japan has begun to employ increasing numbers of foreign laborers. The general conclusion here is that some foreign workers are good for the Japanese economy but of course not many, though "some" is a difficult position to define and maintain. Japan is a country where people in general have a strong belief in their 'pure' monolithic national identity, and the increasing numbers of foreign workers will soon be a national issue, not only economically but also politically, socially and culturally.

In this society where the strong myth of the 'pure' national identity prevails, life is difficult for people of an originally different language, culture, or religion, such as the people of Okinawa, the Ainu and Koreans. They can easily be made the target of discrimination and racism, and at the same time have had to face a policy of 'assimilation.' The Ainu have lost much of their cultural heritage in a forced assimilation policy which has long regarded them as 'uncivilized natives,' though there are now movements organized among the Ainu themselves to revive their culture and seek self-determination. The two largest groups discriminated against in Japan are the Koreans and the Burakumin. The

Koreans, almost all of whom were born and brought up in Japan, number 800,000, the biggest foreign population in Japan, and are a legacy of the Japanese colonization of Korea. The three million Burakumin (Japanese who have traditionally been discriminated against on account of their profession or other reasons), have also been considered a "different people." These two groups are always confronted with this strong belief in a monolithic national identity. This belief has been absorbed into the economic system. If you are a Korean born and brought up in Japan, and even if you are bright enough to have graduated from a prestigious university, your chance of getting a good, decent job is quite limited. There are many world famous companies in Japan, but it is almost impossible for Koreans living in Japan to be employees of these companies, the executives of which at any international conference always talk about the importance and necessity of the 'internationalization' of the so far tightly closed Japanese society and economy. Maybe their companies are willing to open the door to such different people as Europeans, Americans, Australians, and even to some Asians, but to those in their own country, Japan is backward in setting up legal measures to solve the problems the "different" people face daily.

Japanese Blood

The 'pure' monolithic national identity is based upon the assumption of the common 'blood' tie of Japanese people. The Japanese nation was built upon this common 'blood' tie. The assumption goes like this.

The 'blood' here should be 'pure' and 'sacred,' at least 'superior' to other blood, 'sacred' enough, 'superior' enough for people to be proud of. The Japanese nation, constructed upon the basis of this 'sacred' and 'superior' blood assumption, is 'sacred' and 'superior.' The sacredness and superiority is guaranteed by the holder of the most 'sacred,' and therefore the most 'superior' blood, the Emperor. The Emperor is the son of God, and his blood is 'sacred' and 'superior.' This is really an absurd and anachronistic assumption but it more or less still seems to be working in the minds of individual Japanese as well as in the social systems of the nation, and sometimes it surfaces in cases of crisis, either personal or national crises, often culminat-

ing in arrogance, discrimination and racism towards 'others' who don't have such 'sacred or 'superior' blood. Though this kind of assumption is not uniquely Japanese, what is important here is that the emperor, the 'sacred' and 'superior' being guarantees the righteousness of this assumption, which, in its turn, guarantees the sanctity of the Emperor. This inter-related and inter-dependent vicious circle is the most powerful basis of the Emperor system in Japan. Those outside this circle are considered 'different.' People, no matter whether they were born in Japan or have arrived just now. Inside the circle there is still discrimination among members of the circle, but the circle as a whole will still discriminate against those outside, and it might get angry and react as a whole even if the insult or the discrimination is meant just for the individual.

Japan's rapid rise to military power (it was supposed to be the fifth of the "Big Five Powers") after the Meiji Restoration gave the Japanese strong support for their belief in the inherent superiority of their nation, based upon the superiority of their blood. As a self-proclaimed leader, they could look down on other Asian peoples, and as a strong member of the North at that time, could also look down upon non-Europeans, non-whites such as Blacks in Africa or in the USA. But at the same time, they also sometimes had to painfully recognize that they themselves were not Europeans or whites; they were just another group of yellow Asians always looked down upon and discriminated against. This recognition, however did not lead them to form a true solidarity with other Asians or non-Europeans, non-whites. They got angry at European racism as Asians, non-Europeans, non-whites, or more exactly as self-proclaimed leaders of those "wretched" people, and at the same time as a nation with the power and status of big European powers they showed their own racism towards other Asians or non-Europeans or non-whites and strongly looked down upon them. The culmination of this dual process was the Pacific War. Japanese declared they fought a 'holy war' for Asians or non-whites long enslaved by Europeans, but actually they tried to enslave them.

And today the situation has still not completely changed. After the period of devastation and misery following its defeat at the end of the