

Migration Policy Trends in Japan and South Korea

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In this presentation I will examine trends in migration policy towards unskilled workers in Japan and South Korea. In both Japan and South Korea the following shared conditions have created a negative policy environment with regard to accepting foreign laborers: 1. Japan and South Korea are both “island-style” countries when it comes to migration, 2. Japan and South Korea both experienced high levels of economic growth in the postwar period without accepting large numbers of foreign workers, 3. Japan and South Korea formed and maintained strong nation-states under the aegis of exclusionary ideologies such as that of “national homogeneity”. Moreover, for South Korea, these conditions were formed in a manner inseparable from its relationship with Japan.

Flows of foreign laborers to both countries came into full swing as they experienced prosperity in the latter half of the 1980s. Furthermore, the acceptance of Nikkeijin and the foreigner industrial training and technical internship programs adopted by Japan (and based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*) were imported verbatim to South Korea as can be seen in the preferential treatment of Koreans in China and the industrial training and employment training policies introduced there.

Both Japan and South Korea carried out similar policies under shared conditions for over ten years in this manner. However, during this time, significant differences emerged with regard to the management of these policies and the realities on the ground. In South Korea, explicit infringements on human rights, as well as the number of illegal residents significantly increased, leading, in 2004, to the introduction of an employment permit system for foreign workers, and the abolishing of the training schemes in 2007. In contrast, Japan has fixed itself on maintaining the status quo, making only slight changes to its training programs. However, there is no doubt that current policy trends in Japan, including policy debate regarding the training programs and wider debate on migration policy at large, have been influenced by the changes that have taken place in South Korea. Today it is Japan who is watching South Korea. There is no doubt that a relationship between the two countries that inherits the conditions created by the past will continue in the future. This is a relationship in which Japan and South Korea stimulate each other with regard to migration policy and, in particular, the acceptance of unskilled workers.