

## **SLOWLY, JAPAN OPENS UP**

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### **Body**

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SOME Americans worried about immigration are looking at Japan for guidance. With its extremely tight rules for permanent residence, Japanese society is relatively peaceful, which some attribute to a homogeneous population. Ergo, tight immigration rules work. Right?

Not so fast.

Japan's cultural homogeneity probably helps cut down on the kind of social disruption caused by the frequent or sudden arrival of new groups in other countries. Yet it is not a good model for the United States. There's no way, short of Bosnian-style "ethnic cleansing," that the United States can turn back the clock and erase the diversity of the U.S. population.

Japanese sometimes blame the variety of races and cultures in America for our social problems. They may be right, in part. But Japan's historic homogeneity poses its own problems.

\* Japan has a significant minority of Koreans, the legacy of Japan's 1910-1945 colonial rule of Korea. The Koreans, rivals of the Japanese for centuries, have remained essentially unassimilated in Japanese society.

Koreans who still hold Korean nationality - it is very hard to become a naturalized Japanese citizen - are often discriminated against in Japanese society. Young Korean-Japanese have a harder time than their Japanese classmates finding jobs. The nearly 700,000 Koreans are marginalized in the economy into small businesses and one lucrative but unrespected segment of the economy: pachinko, a form of legalized gambling.

\* Japan's historic inexperience with other societies and cultures has dulled sensitivity to others. It fed the racism and feeling of national superiority that led Japan to colonize half of Asia - brutally - in the years leading up to World War II.

Today Japan is slowly opening up. Foreigners have come to Japan as traders, journalists (I was one of those), English teachers, and low-wage laborers. Yet inexperience with other cultures continues to pose problems.

\* Japan today has about 300,000 illegal immigrants, most of whom do the dirty, dangerous and low-wage jobs that prosperous Japanese don't want any more. During the 1980s, the government turned a blind eye to the influx, because the immigrants have allowed many marginal businesses to stay afloat.

Last year, the number of foreigners in Japan exceeded 1 percent of the country's 124 million population. But the government, under pressure from an economic recession, has stopped ignoring the inflow and has begun rounding up and deporting undocumented foreign laborers.

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Among those who remain, illegal status makes it hard for immigrants to complain when things go wrong. If an industrial worker's hand gets mangled in a machine, can he go to a doctor for help? Collect damages from the employer? Technically yes, but illegal workers often won't try for fear that they'll get thrown out of the country.

There is also a huge, exploitive trade in women for prostitution. The yakuza (Japanese mafia) regularly hire poor women from the Philippines and Thailand to work as "dancers" in Japan. The women borrow money to pay for their air fare. After reaching Japan, yakuza confiscate their passports, and the newcomers are forced into prostitution to work off their debts.

## Notes

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## Classification

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