

Hiromi Mori, *Immigration Policy and Foreign Workers in Japan*. Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1996. xiii + 227pp. £42.50.

The issue of migrant labour has prompted a great outpouring of Japanese academic writing in the last few years. The topic has also been covered in English, notably by Komai Hiroshi (1995). In Britain, Tony Fielding at the University of Sussex is working on it. Alas, this book by Hiromi Mori, a professor of statistics at the Economics Department of Hosei University, does not add a great deal to the debate.

Basically the book is a grab-bag of statistical data relating to migrant labour, poorly organized and naively interpreted. It covers much of the same ground as the Komai book, but without any of the colour, detail, direct experience and range of reference which are Komai's strengths. Instead, the migrant workers are reduced to abstract statistical units. Along the way there are some intriguing figures, but all too often the data-gathering methods appear suspect and the possible meanings of the numbers are not brought out.

Take the issue of remittances for instance. Mori has cross-referenced international balance of payment statistics from the IMF and immigration figures from Japan's Ministry of Justice to generate average annual remittances from migrant workers to their people back home (p. 84). Counter-intuitively, the figures show remittances falling steadily through the bubble years, from a high of ¥838,000 per person in 1982 to a low of ¥173,000 in 1992 (the last year surveyed). Does this mean that things were getting constantly worse for the workers, or that many more migrants had their families with them in Japan? Neither explanation seems likely, but Mori offers no explanation at all. One is left feeling suspicious of the figures themselves.

Elsewhere, sophisticated calculations are grounded on undefended assumptions. It is of course very difficult to predict how much migrant labour Japan might need in future, but

Mori surely needs to justify his choice of 3.5 per cent to 4 per cent growth in calculating long-term labour shortages (pp. 91, 132). The figure is a lot higher than recent Japanese growth rates, and is used to predict a short-fall of up to 27 million workers by 2025 (p. 93). Nowhere does Mori discuss the fact that if Japan does have a labour shortage that will automatically hold back growth in turn. Unemployment in Japan has been rising for some years, but Mori does not mention this fact or discuss the possibility that Japan might not even have a labour shortage in the next century.

The book claims to be about immigration policy, but in its obsessive accumulation of statistics it ignores important aspects of it. The fingerprinting system is never mentioned; nor the requirement to carry the alien registration card at all times; nor the need for non-nationals to acquire a re-entry permit every time they travel outside the country. These are part of the daily harassment which blights the lives of foreign workers in Japan and they surely require attention. As it is, the lack of detail leaves Mori's occasional condemnations of government policy sounding rather weak.

The book discusses at length the legal reforms of 1990 which made it far easier for companies to employ foreign workers as 'trainees'. Mori states (p. 126) that the system is widely abused, but unlike Komai he offers no evidence or detail. Moreover, Mori never puts his finger on the key contradiction in the Japanese government's approach: that in most cases employers do not *want* to train skilled workers. What they want is people to do the poorly paid, unskilled work at which Japanese workers turn up their noses. Even where companies *do* want to train foreign workers, it is hardly worth their while since the government, in its fear of long-term residence by foreign workers, insists that they be sent back to their countries within two or three years. The system is not just open to abuse, it is *designed* to be abused. This is not clear from Mori, partly because he neglects to mention the strictly limited periods of residence allowed to trainees. The same applies to his discussion of Nikkei workers.

Mori's political naivety shines through again where he says that 'despite the tough immigration practice, clandestine workers have displayed a remarkable astuteness in responding to the intensification of labour shortages' (p. 96). He shows no awareness of the fact that the immigration authorities are not always as 'tough' as they make out – that Japan has a long history of turning a blind eye to illegal immigration when it has suited the authorities to do so. Or, as Rey Ventura, an astute clandestine worker himself, puts it:

All our efforts to live invisibly were nothing more than a charade in which the workers, the recruiters, the Mig-mig (immigration officials) and the police all played their part. We lived in hiding. They pretended not to see us. When public opinion demanded, they made a token raid. For the rest of the time, we were a necessary evil. We thought we were so clever. We thought we knew the ropes. *Whom did we think we were kidding?*

(Ventura 1992: 171)

It is the lack of this kind of street awareness that damages Mori's book. He wrote it at the International Labor Office in Geneva, an awful long way from the people it tries to describe. Without a grounding in social reality, all the statistics in the world will not convey the true nature of the complex struggle now going on in Japan over the issue of migrant labour. But even with just statistics, Mori could have done better: incredibly, he does not include deportation figures among his fifty-six tables.

It does not help matters that the book is littered with grammatical errors and even figures are misprinted (e.g. with the wrong number of zeroes on the end of them). Observations

are repeated several times over and there is no conclusion – the book just stops. Did anybody at Macmillan edit it?

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References

- Komai, Hiroshi (1995) *Migrant Workers in Japan*, trans. Jens Wilkinson, London and New York: Kegan Paul International
Ventura, Rey (1992) *Underground in Japan*, London: Cape.