

# When the Leading Goose Gets Lost: Japan's Demographic Change and the Non-Reform of its Migration Policy<sup>1</sup>

Gabriele VOGT

Professor, Institute for Asian and African Studies  
University of Hamburg

## **Abstract**

Population aging and shrinking continues at an unprecedented speed in Japan. In particular, it is the working age population (15–64 years old) that has been showing rapid decline. However, unlike other industrialized nations, Japan has no coherent and sustainable immigration policy to counter this decrease. The number of foreigners in the country (2011) accounts for 1.63 percent of the overall population. Only recently did Japan grant migrant healthcare givers from the Philippines and Indonesia access to its domestic labor market, which opened up the sector most influenced by the demographic change brought about by the entry of an international workforce. However, the new migration scheme has so far turned out to be a failure; the conditions are unattractive and hardly interests applicants to work in Japan. This paper argues that the system is indeed designed to fail; Japan's migration policy serves as an example of the indecisive character of the state's politics and its isolationist tendencies. This time, unlike in earlier decades, Japan refuses to take up the role of the leading goose for its region and beyond.

Keywords: Japan, Philippines, Indonesia, migration policy, demographic change, healthcare sector, Economic Partnership Agreement, Flying Geese Paradigm

## Introduction

SINCE THE 1960s, Japanese economists have been using the *Flying Geese Paradigm* to describe Japan's so-called economic miracle—its high growth period—and the impact on its Asian neighbors. Kaname Akamatsu,<sup>2</sup> an economist from Hitotsubashi University,<sup>3</sup> explained the paradigm as follows:

The wild-geese-flying pattern of industrial development denotes the development after the less-advanced country's economy enters into an international economic relationship with the advanced countries. [...] Wild geese fly in orderly ranks forming an inverse V, just as airplanes fly in formation. This flying pattern of a wild geese is metaphorically applied to the [...] three time-series curves each denoting import, domestic production, and export of the manufactured goods in less-advanced countries (Akamatsu 1962, 11).

This paradigm, originally referring to economic development, states that less developed countries tend to follow the path of more developed countries, who become more burdened by an extraordinary responsibility to pave a sensible and successful path for the countries in the same region (Mahiwo 1991, 41). In the 1960s, Japan took the role of the leading goose in the pattern, while the newly industrializing economies (NIEs) of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong followed as tier-two countries; and the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia as tier-three countries. The least developed countries in the region at that time, China and Vietnam, formed the rear of the flying geese formation. Half a century later, this order has somewhat changed: China overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy in 2010, a fact that left politicians and economists watching in awe (Bloomberg 2010).<sup>4</sup>

The paradigm—read with the eyes of a historian—states that it is through continuous crossborder interactions that deep and sustainable

development is best fostered. Institutional structures might be put in place, while informal networks might create trust among international partners in negotiations. Best practices can be shared among contemporary social scientists, supporting the argument that interaction fosters development. Japan since the 1960s has somehow proudly taken over the role, not only of an economic superpower, but also that of a mediator enhancing interaction among the Asian nations. Its longstanding efforts to balance the Japan-US alliance, to advance Asian regionalism, and to serve as a *de facto* representative of Asia in the “Group of 8” (G8) are cases in point (Dobson 2004).<sup>5</sup> In addition, Japan’s cultural diplomacy, which proved successful in creating a positive image of Japan within the Asian region (Ogoura 2007; Palongpalong 1991) subsequently allowed its influence to grow beyond just being an economic role model. This so-called soft power—the creation of attraction through subtle, almost unconscious persuasion (Nye 2004)—worked well for Japan (Leheny 2006).<sup>6</sup>

The Flying Geese Paradigm has eventually expanded beyond the narrow realm of economic development into other areas of intense international cooperation. Walter Hatch (2010) in *Asia’s Flying Geese* looks into Japan’s political economy and traces the processes of regionalization within Asia. Another political scientist, Richard Samuels (2007), in *Securitizing Japan*, examines the validity of the paradigm to Japan’s defense policy in the region. These are two of the recent scholarly monographs on the expansion of the paradigm to other areas. This paper aims to contribute yet another small piece to the puzzle by examining the applicability of the paradigm in various policy fields. Two aspects of the paradigm lie at the core of the discussion: (a) the notion that lively crossborder interactions trigger mutual benefit, and (b) the belief that the initiation and implementation of these interactions are not bound to the realm of political elites but encompass economic actors and citizens alike.

This paper looks at Japan’s international political economy vis-à-vis its rapid demographic change, national healthcare system, and migration policies. Next to South Korea and probably China, Japan is among the

global forerunners of an aging and shrinking population (UNSD 2012). However, Japan neither asked for this pioneering position, nor is it too keen on carrying the weight of this burden. Yet it finds itself, once again, leading in terms of having an increasing number of an aging population, as well as in sensing the urgency to reform its migration policy and thus address the negative impact of an aging population on its economy. This also poses a reflective question that asks whether Japan also leads in the sustainable management of its demographic challenges. Will it emerge as a role model for other rapidly aging nations around the globe? The Asian region, as well as distant aging countries like Germany, closely watches Japan's actions in handling its rapidly changing demographics. Of particular interest is the extent to which Japan will make use of international migration as one possible countermeasure to, if not a declining population, a declining workforce.<sup>7</sup>

In 2000, the United Nations Population Division (UNDP) stated that Japan would need significant immigration to keep its working population at the 1995 level. To reach that year's ratio of Japan's working (15–64 years old) to non-working population, it would need the highest share of immigrants; that is, ten million immigrants per year. By 2050, the Japanese population will reach 818 million, 87 percent of which are immigrants and their descendants (UNDP 2000). Needless to say, this number could never be translated into *realpolitik*.

In fact, Japan is an outlier case for students of international migration. Despite being an economically wealthy and politically stable regional leader, it has a strikingly miniscule foreign population, 1.63 percent of its overall population (MOJ 2012). Among the OECD nations, which generally receive international migrants, Japan's foreign population is undercut by the Slovak Republic by 1.3 percent (OECD 2013). Following standard migration theories—particularly the push-pull model of demand and supply<sup>8</sup>—Japan is expected to have a much higher proportion of foreign population. The low proportion might indicate a longstanding political opposition to accepting, let alone, recruiting international labor migrants

(Hollifield 2000). The question that needs to be addressed at present is whether Japan's demographic development might or might not serve as a push factor strong enough to alter the state's deliberations about the future outlook of its migration policy. To what extent does the ongoing decline of its domestic workforce lead to an acceptance of international workers? As reflected in public discourse, the concern lies in the degree of acceptance of a foreign workforce among the political elite, business leaders, and citizens. This leads us to the second aspect of the paradigm. The first aspect corresponds to the question of Japan serving as a role model in tackling its demographic challenges, which it might have already taken up by asking for best practices from other countries.

In light of these, this paper focuses on how regional integration and international migration impact and reinforce each other. Economists see interdependence between regional integration and international migration as predominantly positive since global economic growth is predicated on each of these factors, even more so when both occur at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

It is argued that, *yes*, Japan's migration policy had undergone some recent changes, which might be directly linked to the nation's demographic development, *but* these changes do not go so far as to be called an actual migration policy reform. The *yes, but* argument will be reflected in this paper through the two case studies of the recently established bilateral economic partnership agreements (EPAs) of Japan with Indonesia and the Philippines. These EPAs provide the regulations for the international migration of healthcare givers from these two countries.<sup>10</sup> Initially, one might regard this new migration avenue as a means to cater to Japan's healthcare sector, which finds itself already strained by continuously growing labor demand and by a declining workforce. However, as this paper will reflect, this new migration avenue is, in fact, a system deliberately designed to fail. It serves as a window-dressing to a strong, clear, and prevailing *no* to opening Japan's borders to an international workforce. This paper will set aside the discussion of the normative implications—whether it is “good” or “bad”—of Japan's latest migration policy; but it will identify and name the policy for what it is; in this case, a dysfunctional one.

## Research design

Migration policy generally spans a wide range of various policy fields. Understanding international migrants as an additional workforce and as taxpayers, for example, creates the need to study labor market policy and public policies. Meanwhile, focusing on issues of cultural diversity leads us to study, for example, integration measures as an element of domestic security policies, as well as local *machizukuri* (community-building) initiatives carried out by the migrants themselves or by members of the receiving country. To those interested in the role of international migration as a determining factor for border control, issues of national security, state sovereignty, and international relations will be central in the studies. One might think about an ongoing list of other examples, which clarify how closely migration policy intersects with other policy fields; however, more often than not, multiple fields will be touched in a single study.

This paper presents a multilevel study on aging and migration in Japan. It aims to focus on multiple issues, primarily on the framework of migration policy vis-à-vis the so-called intimate and public spheres. With regard to the public realm and the macrolevel social analysis, issues of Japan's demographic change will be of high relevance; these include Japan's labor market, shrinking workforce, and the discussions surrounding replacement migration as a countermeasure to these developments. On the microlevel, the paper tackles the issues taking place within Japanese families, such as the changing attitude to healthcare giving, and covers the intimate sphere of caregiver immigration from a Japanese perspective.

Moreover, it aims to contribute cases studies to the two aspects of migration theory: (1) the gap theory, which approaches migration studies using a political science perspective, and (2) the push-pull model, which entails an economics perspective. Firstly, the gap theory, using Cornelius and Tsuda's (2004) argument, says that many states show a "divergence between *policy output* (official guidelines) and *policy outcome* (actual result) in migration policy," where Japan is no exception (Vogt 2012). On the contrary, Japan is a more extreme example of the existence of such a

gap.<sup>11</sup> This paper will elaborate on the significance of the recent healthcare-giver migration to Japan for its migration policy gap.

Secondly, the push-pull model of demand and supply states that world regions of relative economic prosperity and political stability will be attractive to global human resources, while other regions will lose their well-educated workforce (brain drain) because of a lack of attractive wage levels and living conditions. Economists suggest that this imbalance is the only precondition necessary to set off human migration chains. However, James Hollifield (2000) argues against this assumption, stating that, in fact, state action allows for or prevents crossborder migration flows from occurring. This latter course of action will be supported by the case study in this paper.

The succeeding discussion will introduce the intersecting policy fields, demographics and migration in Japan. Following the introduction, I will present a case study on Japan's bilateral EPAs in the realm of the intimate and public dimensions of migrant healthcare givers in Japan. These agreements have been signed with the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam and allow healthcare givers to immigrate to Japan. In pursuing these case studies, the paper uses the qualitative content analysis of data released by various governmental bodies of Japan, as well as by nongovernmental organizations, labor unions, and companies. A special focus will be given to the political aspects of the case study; in addition, the relevance of the gap theory and the push-pull model will also be discussed.

### **Intersecting policy fields**

As Japan's population continues to age and shrink, one of the most pressing questions the nation's policy-makers face is: who is going to work for Japan in the near future? In 2005, Japan entered a period of negative population growth; that is, the size of the overall population shrank. In particular, those aged between 15 and 64 years—the working population—decreased particularly rapidly. Projections estimated a decline of this group from 66 percent of the overall population in 2005 to 51 percent over the

course of five decades. Over the same period, the younger generation (below 14 years old) will drop from 14 percent to a mere 8 percent. The only age group that will grow is that of the elderly (65 years old and above)—from 20 percent in 2005 to 41 percent over the next five decades. By 2055, the ratio of working to nonworking population in Japan will be about 1:1, while the proportion of the young nonworking population becomes miniscule. In addition, there is a significant numerical shift within the elderly generation; the proportion of those above 75 years old will increase sharply, from 9 percent in 2005 to 27 percent in 2055 (Nihon Kango Kyōkai 2011, 3).

The effects of this shift on Japan's population demographics are severe; in particular, the elderly dependency ratio swells and strains the nation's social security systems. Using a case study-centered approach, one sees that the question of who is going to work for Japan in the near future is nowhere nearly as pressing as in the sector of elderly healthcare. The domestic workforce currently cannot meet the rising demand in this sector; in fact, the ratio of job openings to healthcare givers is twice that of the average of all other industries in Japan (Vogt 2007, 18). Currently 1.4 million healthcare workers for the elderly are employed in the country. According to the *Asia News Network* (2012), by 2025, the country will need an additional 900,000 workers to meet the rising demand in this sector.

Unsurprisingly, this sector is the first to be opened to a sector-specific and nation-specific migration avenue, closely monitored through the EPAs, which Japan has signed with three countries. The following subsections will discuss the structure of Japan's healthcare sector and migration policy.

### *Japan's healthcare policy*

Professional healthcare services for the elderly have seen a distinct rise in Japan over the past decades. The paper argues that this trend is linked to the numerical changes in population demographics, although, as outlined above, this is only part of the story. Other factors that brought



about the rise in demand of professional elderly healthcare include the shift in attitude among the generation who receive care, and in the generation that gives it. In the longitudinal analysis between 1995–2003 by the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan, the number of elderly stating that children have a duty to serve as their healthcare givers decreased from 57.3 percent to 48.6 percent; while the number of those in the caregiving generation who said that it is a filial duty to take care of their parents declined from 36.1 percent to 28.7 percent (CAO 2004). Moreover, in April 2000, long-term care insurance was introduced in Japan; since then, financial assistance to afford professional healthcare has become readily available to the general public.

While this shift in attitude is not an extreme one, it shows a steady trend towards the socialization of care. It is not only family members who take over the responsibility of elderly care; professional help is also becoming more and more acceptable within Japanese society; this is especially true for elderly women. In a survey by Unicharm, a large manufacturer of intimate care products, two-thirds of Japanese men still prefer their spouses to perform intimate care for them; while only one-fifth of the women do. Of the elderly women, 25.1 percent prefer their daughters to perform assistance with intimate care, while 32.7 percent—the largest group—prefer a professional caregiver to do the task, which is a major part of healthcare giving to the elderly (Unicharm 2008).

In the study of the implications of healthcare-giver migration to the domestic business sector, institutional care should be clearly delineated from the home-helper sector where the demand for workers is increasing more rapidly. The EPAs that regulate the movement of natural persons is specific to institutional healthcare givers and do not include home caregivers or domestic helpers. Bearing this in mind, a brief look at the labor market situation of healthcare givers in institutional care is appropriate. Among the industrialized nations, only Japan has a shortage of registered nurses—instead of a shortage of beds—as its most pressing problem when it comes to providing healthcare for a growing elderly population. Japan's average of 6.4 registered nurses per 1,000 patients, compared to those of two

leading countries in medical care, Germany's 9.7 and Sweden's 10.6, is comparatively low (Nihon Kango Kyōkai 2008, 2011; Vogt 2011b).

In other words, the most pressing need in Japan's healthcare labor market is the shortage of qualified personnel, a fact acknowledged by Japanese politicians and bureaucrats of relevant ministries. The question that needs to be asked, however, is *who* are the actors deemed suitable to counter this labor shortage? The fact that government representatives usually start their listing of preferred policy measures with (1) increasing the labor market participation of youth and women, followed by (2) increasing the use of care robots and technology, and (3) recruiting labor immigrants reveals a lot (Interview with Kōno, 20 February 2006). It reflects the difficulties politicians and bureaucrats—and to some degree also citizens—have in coming to terms with accepting and welcoming international labor migrants in large numbers. Japan for many years has been a country of side-door and back-door labor immigration (Vogt 2007). Today, it faces the need to profoundly revise this approach and to implement coherent and sustainable front-door immigration avenues (Vogt 2011a).

### *Japan's migration policy*

More than a decade ago, economist Yasushi Iguchi stated that Japan had entered the second wave of a nation-wide immigration discourse. While the first wave dates back to the 1980s and was pragmatically centered on the issue of labor shortage (*hitodebusoku*) during the bubble years, the second wave started around the early 2000s when Japan's demographic change became a prevalent issue in the political, public, and academic discourses. Iguchi argues that there is nothing pragmatic in the second wave; rather it is a continuation of a highly emotionalized debate that is driven by a sense of crisis (*kikikan*) about the future of an aging country with few children and many elderly (*shōshikōreika*) (Iguchi 2001, 44).

Until the global economic downturn following the Lehman Shock in winter of 2008–2009, Japan had come to see a steady increase in the number of international immigrants, most of whom arrive as workers.

The economic downturn left none of the immigrant groups untouched; the Brazilian community in particular was the one most severely affected. Factory workers in the automobile and electronics industries were hit hard as well; many were laid off, and the Japanese government even offered cash for them to purchase return tickets to their home countries (Roberts 2012).

By the end of 2011, the number of registered foreign residents in Japan stood at 2,078,480; this represents a mere 1.63 percent of the total population (MOJ 2011; MOJ 2012). Japan's immigration policy officially "rest[s] on two pillars: firstly, immigration should only be available to highly skilled individuals, and secondly, immigration should always be on a purely temporary basis" (Vogt 2012). Ironically, around two-thirds of Japan's immigrant population fails to meet these criteria. This failure to adhere to the principles of Japan's migration policy guidelines "is not only condoned by the institutions of the state but in most cases is a direct result of the political initiatives of these institutions. Japan is thus an extreme case of the divergence between policy output (official guidelines) and policy outcome (actual result) in migration policy" (Vogt 2012).<sup>12</sup>

This study argues that Japan's latest migration policy reform—the implementation of bilateral EPAs, including the so-called movement of natural persons—is a rare attempt to cautiously adjust *policy output* according to *policy outcome*. Guidelines are being implemented to justify the on-the-ground reality of population aging and the needs of the healthcare labor market without compromising the basic principles of Japan's migration policy. Thus, what we see is, firstly, a bizarre discourse about the skill level of healthcare-givers deemed as "skilled workers" (Oishi 2005, 41), a category used by Japan's Ministry of Justice, which oversees the Immigration Bureau, for medical doctors, professors, journalists, missionaries, etc. Nurses also fall under the same medical residence permission as doctors do. Visa categories exist for all these professions; however, until today, there is no specific visa category for healthcare workers, instead, they work in Japan under "designated activities" (*tokubetsu*

*katsudō*). Another outcome of the Ministry's attempts to ensure that the arriving migrants do not counter the two pillars of the migration policy is the establishment of an EPA system that has turned out to be rather rigid. In theory, the system allows for a long-term stay in Japan, but in practice, sets the hurdles too high so that almost no candidate can pass.<sup>13</sup>

### **Case study: Japan's EPAs and the "Movement of Natural Persons"**

Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has been in support of Japan's knitting close ties in international business, trade, and 'movement of natural persons' with its neighboring countries. In the 2003 report on the *Utilization of Excellent Overseas Human Resources*, METI stated that the "stimulation of innovation," which "will be essential in sustaining economic growth in Japan in the future" shall be triggered not only by a domestic workforce but also by "outstanding human resources from all over the world in the areas of management, research and technology" (METI 2003).

A decade after issuing this report, METI and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) have continued to support Japan's expansion of its net of EPAs. Whereas other ministries (particularly the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW)—a target actor of much lobbying of profession-specific interest groups—and the Ministry of Justice (most directly concerned with immigration control) have put much effort into opposing EPAs in general and the chapter on movement of natural persons in particular. All of Japan's EPAs include engineers and specialists in humanities and international services, which are the groups targeted in the movement of natural persons. The EPAs with the Philippines, Indonesia, and recently, with Vietnam also include the professional groups of "nurses and care-workers," while the EPA with Thailand adds "instructors" as a target group. In other words, while the chapter on the movement of natural persons only comprises a few of the usually many hundred pages of an EPA, it remains a prevalent theme in all of them.

*How the system is supposed to work...*

The EPAs signed by Japan with Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam state that “entry and temporary stay [...] shall be granted [...] natural persons who engage in supplying services as nurses or certified care workers” (JPEPA Article 110, 1, f). Every year, a total of 1,000 healthcare givers for each country are granted entry and temporary work permission to Japan via the bilateral EPA; however, up to this day, this quota has not been met once.

The EPAs between Indonesia and the Philippines administer the migration avenues for healthcare givers in general and distinguish between nurses (*kangoshi*) and certified care workers (*kaigofukushi-shi*).<sup>14</sup> The Japan International Corporation of Welfare Services (JICWELS, *Kokusai kōseijigyō-dan*), a semigovernmental organization under the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, is responsible for choosing candidates for both tracks through aptitude tests and interviews of candidates in their respective countries. The Japan Foundation (JF, *Kokusai kōryū-kikin*) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, coordinates the preliminary language training of the candidates before their departure for Japan. Upon their arrival in Japan, the Japan Foundation, the Overseas Human Resources and Industry Development Agency (HIDA, *Kaigai sangyō jinzai ikusei kyōkai*), as well as private language schools, offer additional programs in Japanese language and culture to the candidates. This program is largely financed by the Japanese government.<sup>15</sup> At the end of the initial six months in Japan, the candidates begin their work in the assigned institutions. They will continue their study of the Japanese language and thus will be given some time off during their working hours. The emphasis on candidates’ language education helps ensure smooth communication with their patients and coworkers; it is also necessary in preparation for the national examinations (for both nurses and caregivers), which is taken after a maximum of three years (for nurses) and four years (for careworkers) of on-the-job training. Passing the exam is a necessary step for (a) being employed as certified care givers, and for (b) being granted long-term residency in Japan (Vogt 2011b).

*... and why it isn't working.*

### *Employees*

Several factors make the EPA-administered avenue of labor migration unattractive to potential migrants and employers alike. To potential migrants, the system is unattractive for three main reasons: firstly, their previously acquired skills are not fully acknowledged. Regardless of their work status in their respective countries, they have to work as nursing assistants and assistant caregivers upon their arrival in Japan and until they pass the national examinations. For many nurses, this incompatibility is particularly harsh since it entails a severe downgrading of their status and gradual deskilling (Kingma 2006, 78–120). Nurses are no longer allowed to perform certain tasks that they used to perform in their home countries and are not paid according to their skill level but only at an artificially designed employment level (Vogt 2011a; Vogt 2011b).

Secondly, the program requires participants to acquire additional skills and knowledge, particularly proficiency in the Japanese language, before they are allowed to work as certified nurses and certified healthcare workers. To many candidates, especially to nurses from the Philippines who received their education in the English language, migration to an English-speaking country is by far an easier and quicker route to becoming a successful player in the so-called big business that healthcare-giver migration has become (Kingma 2006, 78–120).

Finally, there is a high uncertainty over planning a future life in the country of their destination. As long as they have not passed the caregiver exam, potential migrants stay in Japan on one-year renewable visas. They are not eligible to claim family reunification during this period; neither are there any efforts from Japan's political actors to institutionalize existing local-level and private initiatives in providing social, economic, and political integration of the migrants into the Japanese society (Vogt 2011a; Vogt 2011b; Vogt 2013).

Most initiatives currently conducted in this field are private, such as, for example, Keiō University's in-house training program that aims to

educate Japanese care-giving personnel on how to best welcome their colleagues from Indonesia and the Philippines (The Japan Times 2010). An Indonesian nurse in the Kansai region praises the efforts of a Japanese doctor, who took the time to sit down with her every evening from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. and helped her study medical vocabulary. This nurse had failed the national exam in the first attempt but eventually succeeded in the second one, and gave all credit to this particular doctor, who made her study ten pages of medical writings in Japanese every evening for about a year. However, the same nurse also reported that she was bullied by Japanese nurses, who apparently considered her more of a burden than an equal co-worker. Even after passing the exam, her assessment of the healthcare sector in Japan with regard to, for example, work-life balance, nurse-patient interaction, and the position of foreign healthcare givers in general is rather gloomy. At this point, she is toying with the idea of migrating again, preferably to one of the European or North American countries.<sup>16</sup>

Again, traditional migration destination countries such as Canada, which provide more generous citizenship and family sponsorship policies, prove to be a lot more attractive to potential migrants who want to build a future in their country of destination (Oishi 2011). Japan, on the other hand, generally offers little more than a transit country or a stopover on migrants' paths of circular migration back to their home countries (Vogt and Achenbach 2012).

### *Employers*

Several factors render the EPA-administered migration scheme unattractive not only to the potential migrants but also to their potential employers in Japan. The uncertainty of their career development makes them risky candidates for employers to invest in. In a 2008 large-scale survey conducted by Kyūshū University's Asia Center, almost two-thirds (61.7 percent) of the hospital chiefs who had been polled felt negatively about accepting foreign nurses into their hospitals. Among those who refused to employ foreign nurses said that one pragmatic reason for this decision was

given by more than half of the respondents (55.4 percent): “because of the manpower and time required to train them.” Indeed, hospitals and nursing homes accepting healthcare givers, for example, need to ensure that there is always a Japanese staff on call for problems that might arise during the migrant caregiver’s shift, which turns out to be a significant extra burden (Vogt 2011b).

Other answers often given to this question all hint toward insecurity and fear when it comes to the migrants’ language proficiency and professional abilities. These answers include: “because of concerns about their communication skills with patients” (60.8 percent), “because I am not familiar with their nursing skill levels” (47.0 percent), “because of concerns about their communication skills with the Japanese staff” (45.2 percent) and “because of concerns about their Japanese language reading and writing skills” (42.5 percent). Language is obviously *the* crucial issue for all parties involved on the ground (*gemba*) of implementing Japan’s scheme of international labor migration (Vogt 2011b).

Lastly, gender also turned out to be an issue of concern. For example, during the matching process of the first batch of Indonesian caregiver migrants to Japan in 2008, 20 percent (86 individuals) of the potential care migrants could not be matched with Japanese employers. Interestingly, 66 of these 86 unmatchable candidates were men (Kobayashi and Sato 01 August 2008). This indicates that, next to ethnicity, many Japanese employers were indeed concerned about gender as yet another marginalizing factor in this predominantly female profession (Vogt and Holdgrün 2012).

### **Searching for the reasons of failure**

*The policy-making process: the initial stage (policy output)*

The identified factors that make the EPA-guided migration system so unattractive to prospective migrants largely came about in lengthy negotiations among different Japanese ministries, showing in particular the imprint of the MHLW.



The Ministry of Justice (MOJ), the leading agency in migration issues and in charge of the Immigration Bureau, refused to participate in serious discussions on opening Japan's labor market to immigrants (Konō, 20 February 2006). MOJ representatives held steadfast onto Japan's migration policy output (as opposed to its outcome) of granting access to Japan's domestic labor market only to highly skilled migrants and only for a limited time, usually not longer than five years (Vogt 2012). Also, MOJ representatives made a clear distinction between, on the one hand, foreign nurses whom they deemed qualified workers and asked to apply for a work permission via the established visa category of medical services (*iryō*) rather than the EPA avenue; and, on the other hand, healthcare workers who were not to be given work permission in Japan because they were not highly qualified according to the criteria (Saita 2006).

METI, together with the Japan Business Federation (*Nippon Keidanren*), pushed for a comprehensive opening of Japan's labor market not only in the service sector but also in shipbuilding and farming. METI had been arguing for a prompt and pragmatic reaction to the labor shortage in the healthcare sector years before; in fiscal year 2004, the ratio of job openings to job applicants had risen to 2.03, while the same ratio stood around 1.00 (with seasonal variations) for all business sectors combined (Vogt 2007, 18). METI leaned toward accepting labor migrants of lower qualifications to work in the healthcare professions, whereas *Nippon Keidanren*, whilst agreeing with METI on the necessity of recruiting transnational human resources, held up its expectations for the competitive recruitment of some of the most sought-after human resources. To this end, *Nippon Keidanren* stressed the necessity of creating a generally welcoming atmosphere and some sustainable basic parameters (such as a network of international schools, etc.) for a potentially increasing population of foreign workers in Japan (Nippon Keidanren 2003).

The MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) also pointed out Japan's labor shortages in certain sectors and aimed to utilize these bilateral treaties as a means to liberalize the international movement of people without going through lengthy reforms of Japan's Immigration Control and Refugee

Recognition Act (*Shutsunyūkoku kanri oyobi nanmin nintei-hō*); a first draft of Japan's immigration law dates back to 1951, and the latest amendments date from 1990 (Behaghel and Vogt 2006, 122–125). As an actor in favor of the EPA-administered migration scheme, the MOFA further anticipated three positive side effects: (1) the stimulating economic impact of the bilateral EPAs on Japan and the Asia-Pacific region; (2) a possibly emerging image of Japan as a more open and modern nation,<sup>17</sup> which might also foster economic growth despite a demographically-induced population aging and shrinking; and (3) hinting toward Japan's manifold responsibilities as an international actor, a prominent role when it comes to ensuring human rights in its region (Vogt 2007, 14–22).

The fact that the three ministries in favor of an EPA-administered migration scheme (i.e. METI, *Nippon Keidanren*, and MOFA) brought very different motives to the negotiating table might have turned things in favor of the ministries more reluctant toward the scheme. The MHLW, as the ministry most concerned with the labor conditions of the domestic workforce, in the end, emerged as the strongest voice in these negotiations. Initially siding with the MOJ, the MHLW was fiercely opposed to the EPA-administered migration system; later, it acquiesced only after having pushed for certain conditions, which the Japan Nursing Association (*Nihon Kango Kyōkai*) brought into the discourse. The main stumbling blocks for potential migrants—that is, their status as assistants irrespective of previous qualifications and their Japanese language proficiency, which is necessary in passing the national exams and in obtaining their visa status in the long run—are direct results of the Japan Nursing Association's influence on the negotiations via its lobbying channel, the MHLW. The association bluntly ensured that working conditions and wage levels in the profession would not deteriorate once it was opened to an international workforce, and actually aimed at improving these conditions first to ensure Japanese healthcare givers who had left their jobs would find it attractive to return. Because of the unattractive working conditions and relatively low wages, the nursing sector has one of the highest turnover rates of all jobs in Japan (Vogt 2007, 17–20).

*The policy-making process: evaluation & recent initiatives  
(policy outcome)*

The unattractive opportunities provided by the sector has resulted in somewhat of a mismatch between the supply and demand sides, most prominently reflected in falling numbers of applicants and potential employers alike. “The number of Indonesians who came to Japan to be nurses or care workers has fallen from 362 in 2009 to 101” in 2012, as did those from the Philippines, “which dropped from 283 in 2009 to 101” in the same year (Asia News Network 2012). In 2009, when healthcare givers from the Philippines entered Japan under EPA regulations for the first year and those from Indonesia for the second year, their respective numbers had already reached their highest level so far. One hundred seventy-three (173) Indonesian nurses and 93 nurses from the Philippines entered Japan; so did 189 Indonesian healthcare workers and 190 healthcare workers from the Philippines (Ogawa 2012, 99). The numbers of those who could be placed successfully has since fallen sharply. In 2011, only 47 nurses from Indonesia and 70 nurses from the Philippines came to Japan under the EPA regulations; while only 58 Indonesian healthcare workers and 61 healthcare workers from the Philippines joined them (Ogawa 2012, 99). The original quota of 1,000 nurses and healthcare workers per country per year has not nearly been met even once.

Moreover, “the exam’s pass rate was abysmal at first. None of the 82 foreigners who took the exam passed in 2009 and only 3 out of 254 did in 2010” (Asia News Network 2012). In 2012, the pass rate for nurses stood at 11.3 percent or 47 persons out of 415 applicants. “Still they are a tiny group, making up just one thousandth of the 48,700 local applicants who passed” in 2012 (Asia News Network 2012).<sup>18</sup> The rising number of passers is mainly a result of a friendlier national exam for healthcare givers, which includes easy-to-read characters to help in the reading of the more difficult Chinese *kanji* characters. Also, simpler Japanese terms have been used instead of the more complicated ones. While this might reflect a more welcoming attitude toward foreign workers in Japan, the EPA-administered avenue of international migration remains largely flawed and unattractive to either side involved.

Furthermore, tiny steps to improve the chances of migrant healthcare givers in passing the exam and getting hold of long-term residency and work permissions in Japan are almost dissolved when the Japanese government simultaneously implements a new national registration system for foreign residents. This new system centralizes the availability of personal data to the MOJ and guarantees the easy crackdown of the so-called unwanted foreign workers. The Japanese government continues to show a *one step forward, two steps back* approach in its migration, as well as in its hardly existing integration policies. This study argues that this indecisiveness in Japanese immigration policy is the result of government bodies hugely divided over the two central questions in this issue: (1) what kind of immigrants should be wooed to come to Japan—a division based on professions and nationalities hardly seems an ideal solution—and, (2) what should be offered to the new immigrants with regard to their period of stay and their participation in the economic, political, and public life in Japan.

To exemplify this prevailing indecisiveness among political actors, Nobuyuki Yumi, a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) told the press that the EPA-administered migration scheme is “not a measure for labour shortage in the nursing and caregiving field. [...] I consider the fields of nursing and health care to be important ones that generate jobs in Japan. Now the Japanese, especially the younger generation, are struggling to find jobs. [...] Former nurses who have quit can be encouraged to return to work instead” (Asia News Network 2012). While this statement clarifies that the discourse of denial of any labor shortage in the healthcare sector still prevails in the MHLW, even the Japan Nursing Association, the most influential protector of the healthcare labor market in Japan, has long come to talk about an actual shortage of staff. In 2006, the organization acknowledged that “however, demands for nursing workers have outpaced the suppl[y], due to the development of advanced medicine, [an] increase in the number of hospital beds and the aging of patients, Japan is now in the state of chronic nurse shortages in terms of both quality and quantity” (Nihon Kango Kyokai 2006).

Two months after Yumi's press statement, during an interview session I carried out in Tokyo on 9 December 2012, a high-ranking bureaucrat with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that MHLW was still "doing anything to prevent EPA from succeeding," while the MOFA was still laboring toward a more comprehensive approach within the EPA-system and toward its expansion to other business sectors and partner countries. This stance is also reflected in a statement made by Keizo Takekawa of the Japanese embassy in Manila. He is reported, during a symposium on aging and labor migration at the University of the Philippines in February 2013, as having called for "much more improvement [within the system]—in addition to addressing the language issue" (Calunsod 2013) by implementing a package of measures. These measures range widely from psychological support to migrants and an improved legal status to a shift in attitude toward migrant workers that would need to take root within Japanese society. This is also along the lines of what Futoshi Nasuno, Director of the Human Resources Policy Office within the METI, argued for during a conversation with the author at an international symposium at Tokyo's Sophia University in December 2013 (Nasuno 2013). On the same occasion, Hiroshi Kimizuka, Deputy Director for General Affairs in the MOJ-adjacent Tokyo Regional Immigration Bureau called for a need to comprehensively address the many prevailing gaps and shortcomings in Japan's immigration policy (Kimizuka 2013).

While in fact we witness some cautious steps toward reform initiatives, it nevertheless seems that the old argumentative boundaries of some ten years ago, when core ministries were debating the framework of the EPA-system, are still prevalent to this day. MHLW is predominantly concerned with the working conditions and job opportunities of the domestic workforce—all the more so in a still struggling global economy after the Lehman-shock—, while MOFA and METI are still working for an expansion and improvement of the EPA-system, and the MOJ suggests fundamental revisions of the immigration policy rather than pursuing nation- and sector-specific bilateral agreements.

*The policy-making process: preliminary evaluation*

At first glance, the present EPA arrangement seems like an open-door migration system in a particular field of employment. In practice, it has so many pitfalls that are sure to degrade it to, at best, a small-scale testing field for new migration policies. This is largely the result of somewhat pragmatic and somewhat ideological conflicts between ministries, which do not find any strong mediator in either the supranational or the subnational realm, let alone in what might be understood as traditional party politics. So far, there has indeed been remarkably little supra-state influence on Japan's migration policy. A convergence of international migration norms—for example, on the question of how to acquire citizenship—hardly occurs (Abe 2006; Surak 2008). We also see relatively little influence on the policy-making process coming from the subnational level. One exception is the diffusion of the concept of integration of foreign residents, which entered the national political discourse as a result of an initiative by numerous local governments in communities with an above-average proportion of foreign nationals, the so-called *Gaikokujin Shujū Toshi Kaigi*.<sup>19</sup> We may conclude this section with the hypothesis that Japan's policy-making culture is still very much driven by the bureaucracy solely on a national level. Policy makers largely miss out on initiatives through the structures of multilevel governance that would enrich the political culture as well as the contents of many policy fields (Vogt 2011a). Instead, they find themselves caught in the deadlock of a competing and rival bureaucracy, which—until the summer of 2013—was not matched by an arena of strong actors from the realm of core political elites. With Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP, *Jiyūminshū-tō*) winning the Upper House elections in July 2013, and thus repeating their Lower House election success of December 2012, they now hold a comfortable majority in both houses; the side of party politics within Japan's political system might emerge strengthened out of this line-up—in fact, we already see this trend occurring today, twelve months into the Abe administration.<sup>20</sup> However, this administration's policy proposals on immigration policy are still to be revealed.

### Concluding remarks

At the center of interest to this study have been the following two aspects of the *Flying Geese Paradigm*: (a) the notion that lively border-crossing interactions trigger mutual benefit, and b) the belief that the initiative and implementation of these interactions are not bound to the realm of political elites but encompass economic actors and citizens alike.

For many of its neighboring countries, Japan's decades-long miraculous economic growth has been sort of a role model; because of its difficulties in coming to terms with its own history and in defining a new position within the Asia-Pacific region, it has never been an uncontested role model. Japan was the leading goose of economic growth, but never a leader of political, let alone military, strength of the region. Very often, however, Japan also proved to be a leader of innovation, with regard to technology, of cultural goods and of numerous global trends. Now more than ever, Japan is asked to step up and take a leading role in shaping new social, economic, and political models for the increasing number of nations with aging populations. Japan once again has become the leading goose—this time, it was pushed into that role. A continuing economic malaise, the dismal state of its politics, and a largely unhappy population (*The Japan Times* 05 June 2011) are more than obvious signs for the necessity of some profound changes (Vogt and Holdgrün 2013).

This study argues that the reluctant leading goose, Japan, is not yet getting lost, but it takes an awful long time to hover in mid-air, unable to choose any direction for further movement, i.e., in designing a sustainable policy that addresses the manifold economic problems of a declining workforce by, for example, reforming the nation's immigration policy. From a political science perspective, the study argues that the reason for this indecisiveness lies in conflicting interests between strong actors. Ministries and businesses, as well as labor lobbyists, neutralize each other's policy proposals. Moreover, largely because of the division in the Houses (i.e. different political majorities in Lower and Upper House), political parties in recent years have been particularly weak political actors, unable to set a

coherent agenda. Finally, elements of multilevel governance in Japan have not yet been powerful enough to enrich the policy-making process with innovative ideas.

It might be that what it takes at this point is indeed some lively border-crossing interactions with each actor, on the level of political elites and the citizens alike. The *Flying Geese Paradigm* tells us that there is no more efficient way to foster profound and sustainable economic development than through border-crossing interactions. The same holds true for fostering political and societal developments. Let this be a call for acknowledging, firstly, a pressing need for multilevel international cooperation among countries that face similar challenges. Population aging and the various challenges to domestic and global labor markets posed by this development are no longer an issue restricted to, for example OECD states, but span around the globe and are about to reach the so-called Global South, too. Secondly, international migrants themselves—as part of border-crossing flows—can be invaluable assets to each country's innovative potential, and should be acknowledged as such. By solely contemplating about the risks international migration poses to social stability and wage levels, we forfeit an opportunity to embrace their vibrant and diverse input to our societies, politics, and economies.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the international symposium on Aging and Migration in 21st Century Asia at the University of the Philippines in February 2013, and at the Inaugural EAJS Conference in Japan at Kyoto University in September 2013. I would like to express my gratitude to the audiences at both events for their questions that were crucial in the process of rewriting this manuscript. My sincere thanks also go out to Michiyo Yoneno-Reyes, Emiko Ochiai, Wako Asato, Midori Okabe and Miwa Yamada as well as to two anonymous referees of the *Asian Studies* journal for prompting me to broaden my research perspective beyond the geographical and ideological boundaries of Japan.
- <sup>2</sup> Kaname Akamatsu (1896–1974) is said to be the father of the Flying Geese Paradigm (*Ganko Keitairon*). He had originally developed the thought of one country's economic growth triggering economic growth in its regional neighbors as early as the 1930s, just after returning to Japan from a two-year research stay in Berlin and Heidelberg, where he had found his scholarly works influenced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy and the thoughts of Friedrich List on national economics.



- <sup>3</sup> When Kaname Akamatsu was teaching at Hitotsubashi University, the school was still operating under its previous name: Tokyo School of Economics.
- <sup>4</sup> The author wishes to distance herself from any understanding of the Flying Geese Paradigm as an “up-to-date version of Japan’s original vision of a Greater Co-Prosperty Sphere for Asia, where the countries of the region are expected to gravitate towards Japan, which plays a dominant role as a leader” (Cortez 1995/96: 24). For an enlightening discussion of the Flying Geese Paradigm from a Southeast Asian perspective, please refer to Cortez (1995/96).
- <sup>5</sup> This group encompasses the world’s largest national economies. Member states include Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.
- <sup>6</sup> Political scientist David Leheny (2006, 232) explained the attractiveness of the soft-power approach to Japan’s political leaders and business groups by stressing two aspects: “in one variant, it represents a peaceful Japan that can encourage other nations to become wealthy and wise through Japan’s own example and generosity. In another, it offers the opportunity to convince other people that Japan’s development as a normal country, with a normal military, is not to be feared, because it is a nation that has only best intentions. If people just get to know the Japanese—through their songs, their television hits, their anime—they will realize that they are kind and decent, creative and curious, and not to be feared.” The political strategy thus is to make use of cultural diplomacy when presenting a Japan that is vastly different from the wartime country, all the while generating a positive attitude toward Japan regardless of the fact that the nation’s political elites largely kept neglecting Japan’s wartime atrocities. Leaving all normative discussions aside, we can conclude very pragmatically that this strategy, to some degree, played out successfully. As social scientist Elena L. Samonte (1991) pointed out, the attitudes of Filipino elites toward Japan and the Japanese had been perceived to be improving. She quotes from a 1989 survey when pointing out that 55 percent of respondents saw an improvement in Filipino-Japanese relations (114); 84 percent of the respondents had a positive view of Japan; and 73 percent had a positive view of the Japanese (113). The Japanese were overwhelmingly viewed as “hardworking, honest, reliable, efficient and courteous” (113). Japanese products were particularly valued as “durable, advanced, using high technology” (114). The author concludes that Japan “though an Asian country” (122) has become a global economic player, and at the same time cautions Japan to stop “look[ing] down on her not so economically successful Asian neighbors” (122). As is well known, Japan’s rapid economic growth soon slowed down from the early 1990s onward. Yet, even today Japan is the fifth largest exporter and importer in the world. Among the top five importing countries of Japanese goods are, next to the US, four Asian countries, namely China, South Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand (Economy Watch 05 June 2013). Border-crossing activities of goods are in full swing. Following the assumption that export/import activities contribute to the making of an image of a nation through soft power, it is fair to conclude that Japan’s efforts in the realm of cultural diplomacy are continuing, and probably still showing effect.

- <sup>7</sup> Migration policy, family policy, and old-age policies, such as medical care, long-term care and the pension system account for the core demographic policies. For an analysis of Japan's demographic policies, please refer to Vogt (2008) and to Klingholz & Vogt (2013).
- <sup>8</sup> Please refer to later sections for a brief discussion of the push/pull model.
- <sup>9</sup> These are further laid out in the research literature on migration and development. For further insights, refer to Portes (2013).
- <sup>10</sup> Although the EPA between Japan and Vietnam has been in effect since 2009, the details of the migration scheme of healthcare givers have yet to be fully agreed upon at the time of writing this paper (MHLW 2013).
- <sup>11</sup> Please refer to later sections for further explanation on Japan's migration policy gap in general, and for its application to the case study presented in this paper.
- <sup>12</sup> While in previous years this fact has often been somewhat ignored by officials of Japan's Ministry of Justice (MOJ), they have now started to bluntly acknowledge the existence of this divergence, as well as a need to address it (Kimizuka 14 December 2013).
- <sup>13</sup> Next to the MOJ, the MHLW is another outspoken critique of the introduction of the EPA-administered migration avenue. Please refer to later subsections in this paper or Vogt (2007).
- <sup>14</sup> Please note that the same terminology is used in the paper at hand. Wherever the paper speaks of healthcare givers, this includes nurses and healthcare workers.
- <sup>15</sup> HIDA is also known under its previous name, Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship (AOTS, *Kaigai gijutsusha kenshu kyokai*). Kazuo Kaneko, President of HIDA, in a conversation with the author stressed the need for the organization to significantly improve their training programs for international human resources in Japan. He specifically pointed out HIDA's goal to substantially alleviate the number of international healthcare giver migrants to pass the various national exams in Japan by equipping them with a solid basis of Japanese language proficiency (Kaneko 17 December 2013).
- <sup>16</sup> Interview was conducted with a migrant nurse, who wished to remain anonymous, in the Kansai region on 30 September 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> As Vogt and Holdgrün (2013) argue, Japan's multiple phases of modernization have always gone hand-in-hand with the nation's opening up to its neighbors.
- <sup>18</sup> These numbers indicate the sum of applicants to the national nursing exam and the national healthcare worker exam (Ogawa 2012, 99).
- <sup>19</sup> The *Gaikokujin Shuju Toshi Kaigi* is a group of small-town mayors, which, interestingly enough, considers itself to be a nongovernmental organization and lobbies the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications for a more comprehensive approach toward integration policies directed to Japan's foreign residents.
- <sup>20</sup> This thought was confirmed in a conversation with Japanese political scientist Jun Iio of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (Iio 28 November 2013).

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