A story that often has been told as a symbolic event for the beginning of modern Japan is that of Commodore Matthew C. Perry who, in July 1853, with four ships sailed into Edo Bay. Perry presented a letter by the president of the United States pressing for American trade privileges in Japan. As history tells us, Perry’s expedition came to a successful end, and he himself won “fame as the man who ‘opened’ Japan” (Jansen 2000: 275) after two and a half centuries of closed-country (sakoku) policies under the leadership of the Tokugawa shoguns. The American warships used by the Perry expedition were half a dozen times the size of any ship in Japan, and “their dark hulls earned them their ‘black ships’ (kurofune) name in Japanese lore” (Jansen 2000: 277). Some 150 years later, the term kurofune is still around. It is being used as a metaphor for something that triggers fundamental changes in Japanese society, politics or economics. Most often these changes hold an inherent quality of leaving Japanese traditions behind and reorienting towards Western models; in any case, however, these changes are groundbreaking and almost revolutionary ones.

To the careful reader of migration literature on Japan it will not have gone unnoticed that for a handful of years now not only is a change in the nation’s migration policy seriously being discussed among politicians, but also among the public and business world alike. Moreover, this predicted change is being characterized as a kurofune to Japan’s migration policy. It is expected that Japan’s migration policy will no longer hold onto its two principles which for decades have shaped its characteristic structure: the limitation of labour migration to Japan to
highly skilled professionals and the limitation in duration of stay for all migrants to a short-term stay. The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) that Japan signed with the Philippines in 2006 and with Indonesia in 2007 contain a new system for labour migration of healthcaregivers from the two Asian countries to Japan, and offer to them at least a theoretical perspective for long-term stay in Japan.² Nothing symbolizes the fundamental change in Japan’s migration policy more than these two EPAs. Unsurprisingly scholars and journalists started to call them *kurofune* to Japan’s migration policy.

Masahiko Ishizuka of Waseda University’s Graduate School of Journalism, for example, refers to the EPA as “Japan’s third opening to the rest of the world in its modern history” (Ishizuka 1 September 2008), in line with the original *kurofune* and the occupation period following World War II. Health-care journalist Keiko Inaba (2008: 30–31) in her book on Filipina caregivers in Japan picks up on a series of articles in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* entitled *Sakoku kaigo genba* [The on-site reality of caregiving institutions as a ‘closed country’]; that is, the ‘closed country’ before the arrival of Perry’s ships. Shifting the focus from employees to employers, sociologist David Chiavacci (2006: 27) characterizes the increasing popularity of foreign firms in Japan as a *kurofune* phenomenon to Japan’s labour market. Drawing on the *kurofune* symbolism, Ishizuka, Inaba, Chiavacci, and others, too, all share an understanding of the opening of Japan’s labour market to foreign capital and foreign workers as an answer to a crisis. Yasushi Iguchi (2001: 44), a Kwansei Gakuin University economist, was first to frame this sense of a crisis (*kikikan*) about a fundamental yet involuntary reorientation in migration policy as one induced by Japan’s demographic change. In contrast to what Iguchi calls the first discourse on an opening of Japan’s domestic labour market to foreign workers, which largely stood under the impact of an economic relative high-growth era (i.e., the ‘bubble era’) and a resulting shortage in workers, the current, second discourse on international labour migration to Japan is driven by a distinct fear of the negative economic impacts of population ageing and low fertility rates (Iguchi 2001: 40–45).

² Both EPA are mainly trade and tariff agreements between the nations involved. As part of cross-border movements both agreements elaborate on the “movement of natural persons.” The Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA), for example, states that “natural persons […] who engage in supplying services as nurses or certified care workers” (JPEPA Article 110/1/f) are a specific group for whom cross-border movement to Japan will be made possible.