Cross-Cultural Migrations in Japan in a Comparative Perspective, 1600–2000

Leo Lucassen, Osamu Saito, and Ryuto Shimada

1 Introduction

Similar to other parts of Asia, Japan plays a minor role in the historiography of global migration history. Only in the last decades have scholars become interested in the way Japan has dealt with the soaring immigration issue since the 1970s, culturally and economically. Some attention has also been given to Japanese emigrants in Hawaii, the west coast of the United States, and South America (especially Brazil), including the return migration of hundreds of thousands of nikkeijin to Japan since the 1980s. Furthermore the dramatic ‘repatriation’ of almost 93,000 ethnic zainichi Koreans to North Korea in the period 1959–1984 has drawn interest from historians and political scientists working on citizenship issues. Also relevant for our discussion on cross-cultural migrations are studies on the ethnic and cultural diversity of Japan itself and the nature of Japanese ethnocentrism, and on the emergence and decline of Japan’s formal and informal empire since the end of the nineteenth century (and the millions of Japanese involved in conquering, peopling, and guarding these new territories), resulting in the long run in the military presence of American soldiers since 1945, especially in Okinawa. Finally, our reconstruction builds on studies into state-led internal colonization projects, in the north (Hokkaidō) and the south (the Ryūkyū islands).

Part of this historiography has fundamentally criticized the traditional (and Orientalist) idea of Japan as an isolated, culturally and ethnically homogeneous, entity on its own, and as a result the history of Japan since the early

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2 Douglass & Roberts 2000a; Sellek 2001; Morris-Suzuki 2010.
6 Höhn & Moon 2010; McLelland 2012.
modern period has increasingly drawn the attention of Western scholars working in the fields of migration, urbanization, state formation, and empire building. A logical step in this ‘normalization process’ is therefore to include Japan, as other Asian countries, in the booming field of global migration history. And this is what we will do in the following sections, which will map systematically cross-cultural migrations in, to, and from Japan in the period 1600–2000, thus providing the necessary building blocks for comparisons through time and space at a global level.

By focusing on the six main types of cross-cultural migration in Japan since 1600 we will connect what until now have been rather isolated and often unconnected topics in the historical literature: migration, urbanization, economic history, imperialism, and military history. These provide the necessary data on the Japanese moving as soldiers and sailors, as colonists (within and outside Japan), as city dwellers, emigrants, return migrants, seasonal workers, and finally as immigrants from abroad. By reconstructing their mobility in the past four centuries we will provide benchmarks in the form of migration rates per fifty-year period, differentiated for the six main types of cross-cultural migration; benchmarks that can then be used to compare Japan with other parts of Asia and Europe.

2 Japanese Exceptionalism?

If we want to understand Japan’s long-term migration history we first of all need to address the issue of seclusion pertaining to the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) that has loomed so heavily in the historiography. Recent scholarship has shown extensively that isolationist tendencies were largely lacking in the medieval period, beginning with the establishment of the first warrior state, the Kamakura shogunate in the 1180s, followed by a transition in the 1330s which marked the start of two and a half centuries of internal warfare, until the commencement of Tokugawa rule at the beginning of the seventeenth century when the political situation stabilized. The constant fighting between warlords, the organization of which became increasingly complex and specialized, mobilized Japanese society, both socially and geographically. In that sense it resembled, albeit on a smaller scale, the constant fighting between

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9 Important examples being Hoerder 2002; McKeown 2004; Manning 2005 and Gabaccia & Hoerder 2011.
10 Lucassen & Lucassen 2009.