Japan's Response to the Indochinese Refugee Crisis

Thomas R.H. Havens
Connecticut College

Japan — the most prosperous nation in Asia and a world economic power since the 1960s — has donated more government funds than any other country to help resettle refugees from Indochina abroad during the past decade, yet has taken in surprisingly few newcomers and to date has accepted barely six thousand Kampucheans, Laos, and Vietnamese for permanent residence. The sources of this paradox are not difficult to find. Tokyo's response to the Southeast Asian refugee emergency since the mid-1970s is best understood in the context of its enigmatic actions in the Vietnamese conflict of 1954–75, the postwar role Japan increasingly assumed in the region after 1975, and recent challenges to the presumed sociocultural exclusivity of the Japanese people.

In theoretical terms, a big reason for Japan's fitful refugee policy is that the Southeast Asian emigration crisis boiled up just at the time when basic Japanese assumptions about their own society were beginning to shift substantially. By the mid-1970s, more than 90 percent of the public considered itself middle class; discourse about society started to turn from economic issues to debates over identity and meaning. Of these debates, the best known is the publishing subculture on Nihonjinron — what it means to be Japanese, especially as the country interacts more and more with the outside world, yet finds itself emulating other countries less and less. Dispute about social value also addressed world peace, the environment, ethics in government and business, symbolic issues like Narita airport, and questions of age and gender discrimination. More attention was given to caste-based conflict as Burakumin outcastes exerted ever more local and prefectural political influence (Pharr, 1989:232–34). In short, social thought in Japan began to question earlier consensual models of homogeneity (which considered refugees, like all foreigners, extrinsic to the social system) and to show much greater concern with status inequality (among war refugees and other marginalized groups).

Japanese social thinking during the past decade, in the words of Ross E. Mouer and Yoshio Sugimoto, has evolved toward a “multi-dimensional model of stratification” containing “a vision of society which attaches importance to social differentiation” (1989:192). Unlike consensual models, this view postulates a diversity of social thought and behavior, including a good deal of outright conflict; the pursuit of instrumental
advantage by the individual, not merely a quest for group harmony; and
the assumption that personal will and citizen desires are shaped partly
by the state, not just by social consensus (Mouer & Sugimoto, 1989:160–
61). To the extent that official and private Japanese attitudes toward the
refugee crisis have changed since the mid-1970s, international pressures
on a now-rich Japan to play a humanitarian as well as monetary role
have doubtless accelerated this greater domestic awareness of social
inequities and made the public and the government more receptive to
refugees. But the consciousness of inequality and the openness to Indochi-
nese immigrants remain far from complete today.

Silent Partner in the War

As a nation, Japan tried its best to remain aloof from the war that raged
in Indochina, its entanglement in the conflict was riddled with paradox.
Article nine of the postwar Japanese constitution ruled out sending troops
to support its American allies, but the revised Japan-United States Secu-
rity Treaty of 1960 allowed the U.S. to use bases in Japan as prime
staging areas for ground and air operations in Indochina. Tokyo's export
policies did not permit arms to be sold abroad, yet Japanese industries
earned at least $1 billion a year during 1965–72 from providing goods and
services to the United States and South Vietnamese forces. Many Japa-
nese took neither side in the conflict, simply hoping for peace as quickly
as possible, but their foreign minister, Shiiina Etsusaburô, frankly told
the national parliament in May 1966 that “Japan is not neutral” in the

The fighting in Indochina provoked the biggest anti-war movement
in the nation's history among the Japanese public, but it also yielded tidy
profits for a number of industries. As a wry journalist put it, “this coun-
try, just like a magician, satisfied both its conscience and its purse”

Japan's purse was also fattened by its ever-growing trade with
Southeast Asia. Japanese commerce with the region overall soared 700
percent in nominal terms during the war and kept on rising so fast that
by 1979 it was double the value of American trade with the area as a
whole (Barnds, 1979:245). In the early 1970s, the Japanese also switched
goals for economic aid to Southeast Asian countries from pump-priming
credits that spurred the import of Japanese goods to greater technological
assistance and capital investment. By the time Vietnam was unified in
1975, every country in Southeast Asia except Laos, South Vietnam, and
Burma received more aid and private investment from Japan than from
the United States (Blaker, 1984:42). Although Tokyo had provided the
Republic of Vietnam with sizable commercial, technical, and humanitarian
assistance during the war, it moved quickly to open diplomatic relations
with the revolutionary governments in Kampuchea and Vietnam in 1975
— eventually promising aid worth $170–250 million per year to the states