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## **Multicultural Inclusion in Japan: the Seeds of Decentralizing Government Power?**

Japan is a country that, for much of its modern history, is regarded as highly ethnically homogenous. It has been able to elicit dramatic economic development since the postwar period using a primarily domestic, Japanese labor force. Yet a significant immigrant population has remained in the country since World War II, and the population of recent immigrants has steadily increased since the 1980s. Being a country commonly regarded as closed to immigration, my paper proposes to examine the inconsistencies in addressing immigrant populations and fostering multiculturalism on the one hand, and maintaining what appears

to be a strict prohibition on unskilled foreign labor on the other.

Broadly speaking, this research will address developments in the relationship between local and national government in Japan. The Japanese central government is widely regarded as the driving force of its postwar boom, with an all-powerful bureaucracy capable of steering the country through high levels of technological development, building an advanced infrastructure and maintaining a high, egalitarian standard of living. The central government is also regarded as being largely ineffective since the “bursting” of Japan’s economic bubble in the early 1990s, with a lack of clear leadership and competing policy agendas mirroring the country in decades of economic

malaise. In recent years the national government has taken a new tact: decentralizing its power by giving local governments greater decision making authority on a host of important issues. These efforts mirror those of other countries, including Japan's East Asian neighbors like South Korea and China, in an effort to improve the viability and dynamism of the economy and its political system.

Such broad movements toward decentralization can be examined more concretely through Japanese immigration policy. I will consider the policies of two active Japanese municipalities in regards to immigration: the cities of Hamamatsu in central Japan and Kawasaki on the east coast. Both are accommodating to their immigrant populations and strongly promote multiculturalism within their borders. Contrasted with the efforts of the national government, we can see the degree to which these municipalities are willing to extend recognition to their foreign residents in a country that is ostensibly unfriendly to them.

This research speaks to the incremental cultural and social changes occurring in Japan, the changing perceptions of residency, community and citizenship within the country, and can perhaps be generalized to countries that have a similarly strong conception of ethnic homogeneity as they try to adapt to 21<sup>st</sup> century economic and social realities. As the world is becoming more multicultural, Japan is also becoming more multicultural, whether or not the national government chooses to address it. Other countries have to cope in similar ways. This research also points toward efforts at decentralization in states with strong central governments, where localities are given considerably more leeway than they would have received in the past. Finally, it may offer predictions for future policy in Japan, where if these municipalities are regarded as successfully incorporating their foreign residents, they may ultimately exert some influence on national policy.