

# Global Economy and Labor Force Migration: The Case of Iranian Workers in Japan

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## Abstract

A large number of Iranian youth left Iran for Japan hoping to find high-paying jobs at the outset, and for the duration, of the bubble economy. When the bubble burst and unemployment began to increase in Japan, most of these workers returned to Iran, while some migrated to Canada, Australia, Thailand, Singapore and other Asian countries.

This article assesses Iranian immigration via analysis of a database of Japanese government statistics, created for this research. This quantitative analysis is combined with the results of 60 in-depth interviews of Iranian workers in which the hidden aspects of global migration emerge. The quality of workers' lives is shown to be of great concern, with visa status proving the greatest barrier to the safeguarding of health and safety.

**Keywords:** immigration, insurance, Iran, Japan, job hazards, visa.

## Introduction

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find consensus among researchers on the definition of "globalization"; however, almost all of the existing definitions include reference to the "trans-boundary flow of people, capital and information. The flow of people, goods, services, ideas, images, and data have increasingly assumed a transnational character in a global economy. Migration stands at the center of the phenomenon [of globalization]" (Tehranian 1999). And this part can be considered as the core of our work in this research.

"Massive population movements are taking place all over the world despite increasing political barriers to immigration. At the top of the social structure, growing populations of nomads are roaming around the globe...[These nomads act] as managers, producers, guardians, laborers and celebrants of the global economy" (Tehranian 1999). Neither the host nor origin governments can completely control the flow of people. According to the UN, "there are some 27 million world refugees dislocated from their

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homelands because of famine, civil wars, religious persecution, or ethnic cleansing" (UNHCR 1995). When the economy of Japan started booming in the late 1980s, there was a great need for unskilled workers, due to the intensive nature of the economy, and this was soon discovered by unskilled people of nations all over the world. People came to Japan in the thousands from Asian countries, Africa and Latin America. This trend can be seen in Table 1, which shows the number of new entrants from several countries to Japan during the period 1986 to 1996.

**Table 1: Trend in the Numbers of New Entrants from 1986 to 1996**

Country	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Iran	15904	19818	14090	16282	31289	47127	14314	3419	2673	2091	2181
India	17170	17805	18192	17654	16724	15988	16518	17251	17572	18606	21606
China	NA	NA	87264	64251	74264	92110	128226	127446	116851	120612	134140
S. Korea	132604	158625	270226	524072	675956	795496	789255	763209	834630	784016	897467
Philippines	74594	76956	73497	69567	84327	95547	86812	77170	90900	64144	60203
Taiwan	279901	318122	343525	449608	557631	630619	687568	640563	620316	551479	695238
Indonesia	30663	23257	20197	24706	30947	32337	30905	29129	28123	28159	33475
Malaysia	44341	38163	43726	51653	54849	74192	57245	42263	38923	43636	47533
Mexico	7270	8743	10282	8730	9466	8915	9705	9536	8381	7084	8010
Brazil	12918	11479	15968	27819	63462	83785	57574	44804	45790	57020	60187
Peru	NA	NA	1916	5880	10942	22025	15784	11324	10219	6149	4650
S. Africa	2623	1965	1700	1620	1902	2325	2870	2849	2896	2956	2992

NA = Not available.

Source: Statistics on Immigration Control (Japan Immigration Association)

Iran, which is the subject of our study here, had by that time suffered from a revolution and a long-lasting war, the longest war of its history. Although it was so promising in the beginning, the 1979 revolution eventually brought disorder, war and poverty, which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of young men and women, and cost billions of dollars. The aftermath was even worse: the economy has been in a terrible condition ever since.

In addition, the Iranian population is the youngest population in the world with the average age once announced to be 17.5 (Iran Bureau of Statistics 1997), which shows clearly the depth of the crisis that is presently occurring, and which will reveal its full form in the near future, as such a young nation has social needs and, most importantly, its population will need education and jobs.

Since the 1979 revolution, many affluent Iranians have left Iran for Europe and the USA. People emigrated to Canada and Australia if they were educated and had enough expertise and knowledge of a foreign (mainly English) language. In Iran, every day one could hear many stories of those who had gone abroad, which fostered the desire for many more to go themselves.

When news about the rapidly developing Japanese economy was disseminated in Iran, everybody soon knew a friend, a neighbor or a relative who had gone to Japan to enjoy its benefits. Long queues began to appear in front of the travel agencies to acquire an Iran Air ticket to Tokyo. At this time Iran Air was much cheaper than other travel companies, due to the subsidies that Iranian people could enjoy. The Iranian government has been cutting and is continuing to cut subsidies gradually, but the subsidies assigned to each sector are decreasing at different rates. For example, the subsidy in the energy sector, which continues to be very large, is decreased annually and at a very low rate,

while subsidies in service sectors, such as transportation, are being reduced far more quickly. Japan in the late 1980s was not a destination for Iranians who had enough money, expertise or connections to go to the West. Instead it was mainly selected by people who were searching for a high-paying job with which to feed their families back home.

To date, a number of academic studies have considered immigration to Japan and the immigration policy of Japan. However, most of them are written in the Japanese language, so the number of English papers on this subject is very small. The case of Iranians was studied by Yamagishi and Morita (2002) approaching a small number of Iranians who had already gone back to Iran. Yamagishi and Morita's study is based on narratives and mainly reveals the attitudes of interviewees towards Japan. However, our study looks closely at the living and working conditions of those Iranians who came to Japan during the bubble economy, most of whom are still living illegally in Japan. It studies their social and economic situation and tries to understand what their illegal status deprives them of.

Secondly, we briefly explain the methodology used in this study. Thirdly, we take a brief look at Japan. In this section, the emergence and the bursting of the bubble economy is explained. In addition, some characteristics of Japan's population indicating an aging society are elaborated upon. Fourthly, we briefly review the social and economic impacts of the 1979 revolution in Iran, and describe the situation in Iran when the bubble economy in Japan was about to emerge. Intensive discussion about the Iranians coming to Japan is presented next. Sixthly, we explain the social conditions of immigrants and discuss their problems in Japan. Finally, we summarize our discussions in this article.

## **Methodology and Case Study**

To perform this research, a set of data published by the immigration office of Japan was used to construct a database, which was subsequently the basis for statistical analysis. The data sources are as follows: "Statistics on Immigration Control (Japan Immigration Association)" (1989–2003) and "Statistics on Foreigners Registered in Japan (Ministry of Justice)" (1985–2003).

Quantitative analysis can only present one aspect of the lives of Iranian migrant workers in Japan. Consequently, a qualitative perspective is brought via the analysis of interviews that were conducted with 60 Iranian nationals presently living in Japan (Table A-1). These interviews were in-depth, allowing access to the experiences of the interviewees from their own perspective. Interviewees were found using the 'snowball' sampling method – we were introduced to other Iranians via their personal networks – and the interviews took place at their homes and places of work. Iranians were selected as the focus of study after several contacts expressed their sense of 'difference' in their living in Japan, as contrasted with other immigrants. Yamagishi and Morita (2002) argued that, for ordinary Japanese, Iranians are strangers, and their strangeness holds the potential for Japanese to be suspicious and wary of them. This was confirmed in talking to interviewees, as will be seen later in this article. In addition, we can note that the Iranians' rush to Japan was dramatically visible and reminiscent of the Gold Rush of 1848 in North America.

The common questions that were asked included biographical details, such as their birthdates and birthplaces, and more open-ended questions. The questions were:

- 1) Name
- 2) Age
- 3) Birthdate
- 4) Birthplace
- 5) Education
- 6) Military service
- 7) Entry date and vehicle to Japan
- 8) Working conditions
- 9) Life in Japan
- 10) Language barrier and cultural frictions (if any)
- 11) If the interviewees intended to go back to Iran

These questions were the starting points from which the interviewees discussed in detail many aspects of their living and working conditions in Japan, the results of which are given in this article.

### **A Glance at Japan**

Japan has never been considered to be an “immigration country”, nor has it ever been viewed as having an immigration problem. Up to the 1980s, compared to European countries such as Germany and France, few foreigners had actually gone to live and work in Japan, though there were some exceptions, such as the many Koreans and Chinese who were brought to Japan as forced laborers before and during World War II (Spencer 1992). However, recently the issue of foreign labor has become more and more relevant to Japan, as it has to other Western countries, and, consequently, the necessity for an effective and efficient immigration policy cannot be ignored.

The economy of Japan in the late 1980s had a direct influence on its immigration patterns. Following the 1985 *Plaza Accord*,<sup>2</sup> the yen increased dramatically in value. In 1988 it rose to 120 yen against the US dollar, which was three times its 1971 value under the fixed exchange rate system. This marked the beginning of the “Bubble Economy”. A rise in the price of Japanese export goods followed and lowered their competitiveness in overseas markets. However, government financial measures contributed to growth in domestic demand. In 1988 and 1989, corporate investment increased sharply, and due to higher stock prices, new equity issues swiftly increased in value, and they became a vital source of corporation financing. Banks sought an outlet for funds in real estate development. Corporations, in turn, used their real estate holdings as collateral for stock market speculation, which during this period resulted in a doubling in the value of land prices and a 180 percent rise in the Tokyo Nikkei stock market index.

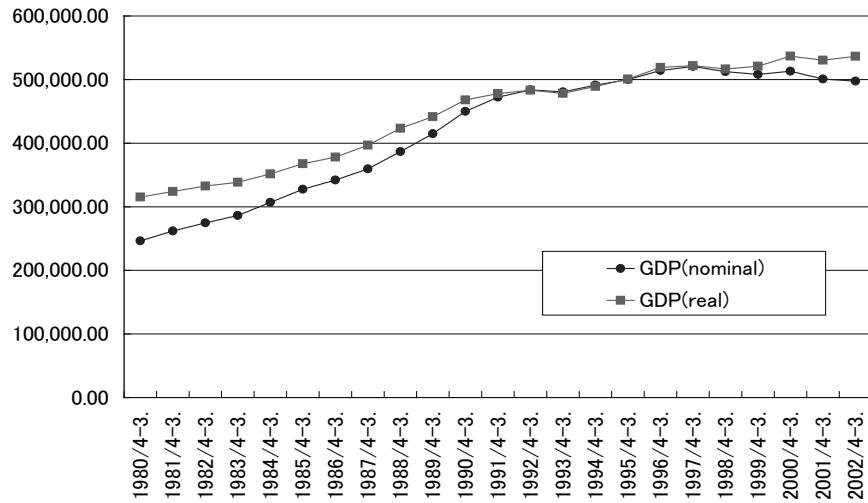
“In May 1989, the government tightened its monetary policies to suppress the rise in value of assets, especially land. However, higher interest rates sent stock prices into a downward spiral” (The Embassy of Japan in Singapore, online source). The post-bubble recession continued through the second half of the 1990s. The characteristics of the bubble economy can be demonstrated by two indicators. Figure 1 shows the historical trend of *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP). As Figure 1 demonstrates, during the 1980s

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<sup>2</sup> The Plaza Accord was an arrangement signed on September 22, 1985 to make the Japanese yen cheaper. It was signed in the Plaza Hotel, in New York City. France, Germany, Japan, the United States and the United Kingdom participated in the meeting.

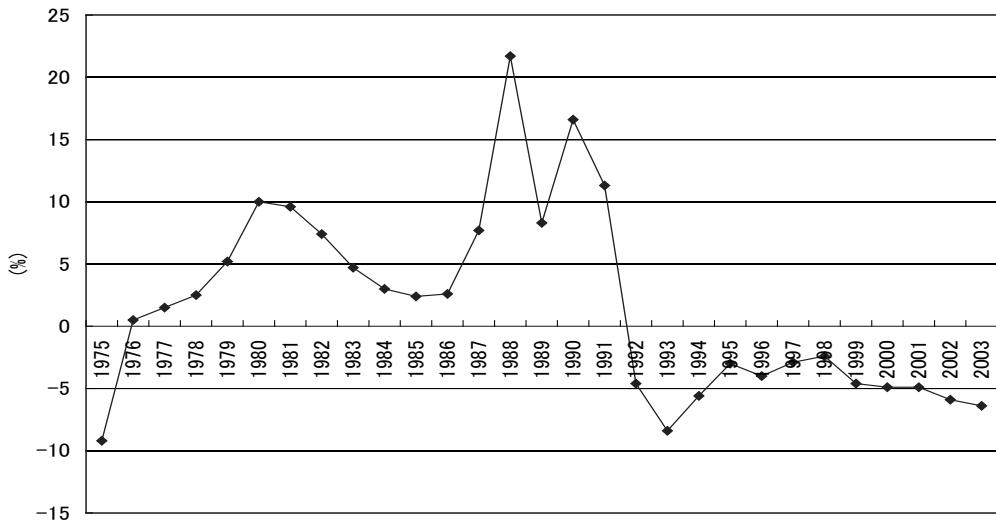
GDP increased rapidly, but from 1992 the growth of GDP was stagnant. Figure 2 shows the change in land prices, and clearly expresses the emergence and the bursting of the bubble economy.

**Figure 1: The Historical Evolution of Japan's GDP (1980–2002)**



Source: ESRI, Cabinet Office.

**Figure 2: The Change Rate of Land Price in Japan-(1975-2003) - %**

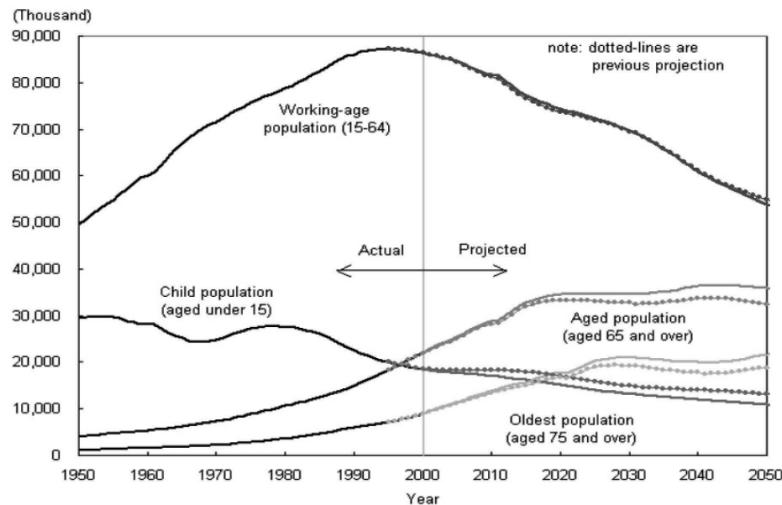


Source: Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport  
(<http://tochi.mlit.go.jp/chika/kouji/20030325/20030325m.html>)

During the 1980s in Japan, secondary industry, consisting of mining, construction and manufacturing, dominated the economy. Therefore, a large quantity of unskilled labor

was needed. Figure 3 demonstrates the trend in the number of employed people in the manufacturing industry. Until 1990, when it became a declining trend, the number of employed people in the manufacturing industry increased constantly. The manufacturing industry of the 1980s is characterized as labor-intensive, while the IT industry of the 1990s can be characterized as technology-intensive. This character of the manufacturing

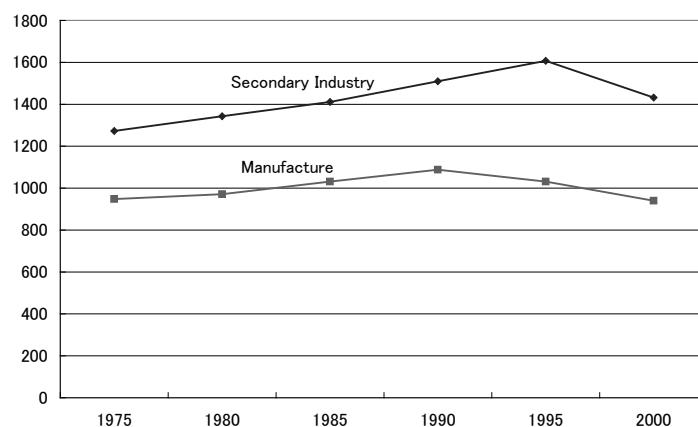
**Figure 3: The Number of the Employees in Secondary Industry in Japan (1975-2000)**



industry in Japan appears to be an important determinant in attracting unskilled laborers from other countries.

It should also be noted that Japan has an aging society. The rapid decline of the birth rate contributes to this tendency. Figure 4 illustrates this trend by presenting the actual and projected age of the population from 1950. This aging society offers serious problems for economic growth, due to a shortage in the available workforce and the burden of increased demands on the pension scheme. It can be seen to have had a knock-on effect in the aging of employees in Japan's manufacturing industries, as shown by Fig. 5.

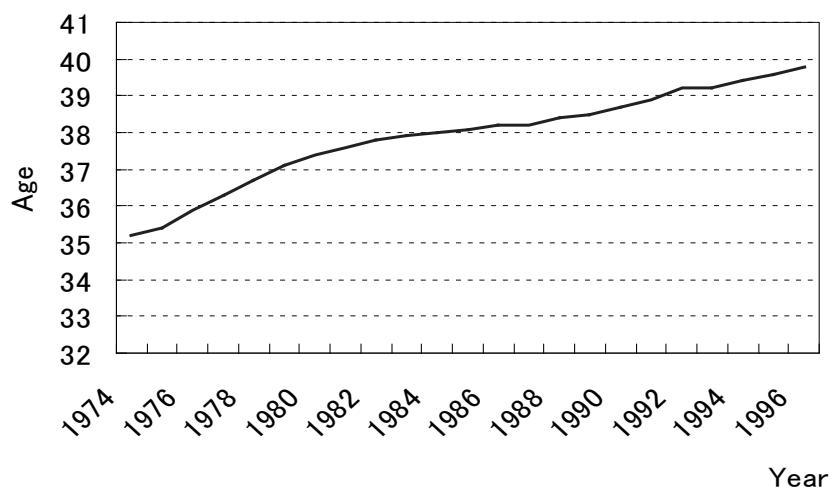
**Figure 4: The Actual and Projected Population (1950-2050)**



Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research  
(<http://www.ipss.go.jp>)

The working age population (between the ages of 16 to 24) was increasing until the mid-1990s, but subsequently began decreasing. According to the projection, it will continue to decrease rapidly until 2050. Furthermore, the birth rate has been decreasing since 1980, although there was a baby boom in the 1970s. The projection shows that the birth rate will continue to decrease. At the same time, the aging population has been increasing since 1950, and will continue this trend until 2020 when it will level out.

**Figure 5: The Trend in Average Age of Employees in Japan's Manufacturing Industry (1974–1996)**



Source: Asgari (1998)

The aging society shown in Figure 4 and the increasing average age of employees shown in Figure 5 clearly indicate the necessity for Japan to find a vital and young workforce from other nations for its full growth and development.

### Where Was Iran Then?

No jobs are created during revolutions. On the contrary, employment simply vanishes during such social fluctuations. Already suffering from the economic consequences of the 1979 revolution, such as unemployment and high inflation, the eight-year-long Iran–Iraq war took its toll on every aspect of life in Iran: social and economic. When the economy in Japan started to grow, leading to what was, in retrospect, the so-called bubble economy, the war had just ended. This war had left hundreds of thousands of young people dead and destroyed the infrastructure of the country, such as dams and power plants, as well as the petrochemical and oil refinery plants, which are the foundation of the main industry in Iran (Amui 2003).

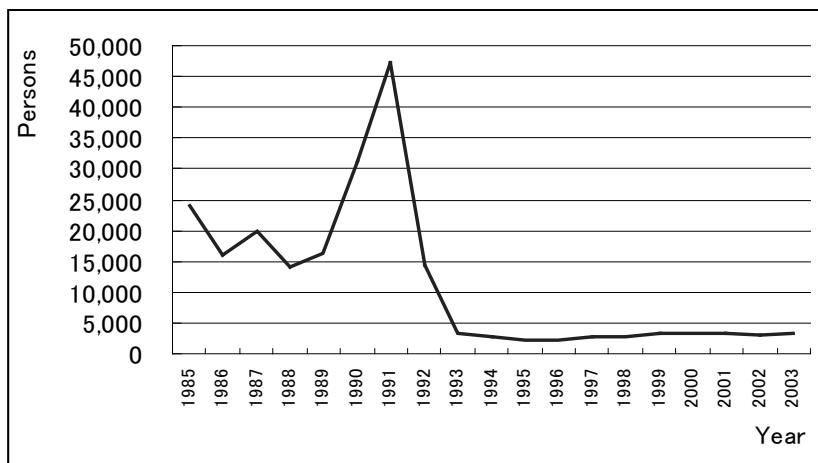
When the war was over in 1988, the inflation rate was announced to be 12 percent (Budget and Planning Organization 1988), although independent economists were giving

higher rates of 20 or 22 percent. To understand the economic changes that happened in Iran due to the revolution and the war, one does not need to scrutinize economic statistics; the difference can be seen in a very simple example. In 1978 an 18-year-old woman who just finished high school and was immediately hired as a primary school teacher was paid some 10,000 Rials (Iranian currency) per month with 72 Rials equaling one US dollar. The same teacher now, after 25 years of experience, is paid 1,200,000 Rials but now 83,000 Rials equals one US dollar. The Rial equivalent to each US dollar has increased an astounding 1152.7 times, yet her salary has increased only 120 times. One can imagine how short of money she is, particularly as the cost of practically every basic need has risen at a similar rate.

The demographic change in Iran after the revolution has also been dramatic. In 1979, the population of the country was 35 million, but it rapidly increased after the revolution, resulting in some 65 million in 1996. According to the census taken by the Iran Center of Statistics in 1996 (Iran Bureau of Statistics 1997), the average age was 17.5, which demonstrates how young the population of Iran was. Additionally, the economy that had been primarily rural and agricultural prior to the revolution gradually transformed into an urban economy. Consequently, numerous jobs in the agriculture sector were lost and many should have been created in other sectors in return.

These economic conditions, coinciding with the economic growth in Japan and existence of a mutual visa-exemption agreement between Iran and Japan, compelled young Iranian men to fly to Japan. Their objective was to work as the unskilled labor force that was necessary for the growth and development of the Japanese economy. Figure 6 shows the number of Iranians moving to Japan from 1985 to 2003.

**Figure 6: Trends in New Entries by Iranian Nationals to Japan (1985–2003).<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> The data for 2000, 2001 and 2003 are estimated.

Source: Ministry of Justice, "Statistics on Foreigners Registered in Japan." 1985-2003.

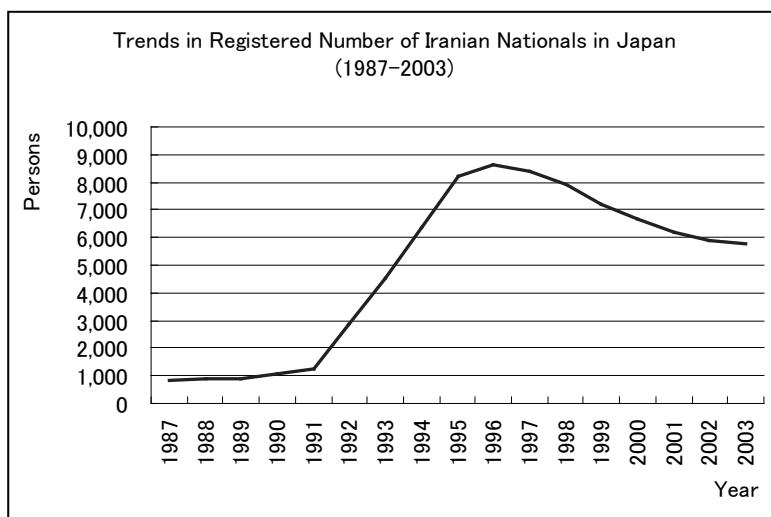
As Figure 6 demonstrates, the number of entrants jumped to its highest level in 1991, numbering 47,127 persons, and subsequently decreased rapidly. This was due to the unilateral abolition of the visa-exemption agreement by the Japanese government, which

resulted in a decrease in the number of entrants to an average of around 3,000 entries from 1992.

Figure 6 shows several tens of thousands of new entrants, which is contrary to the data in Figure 7, which demonstrates that the numbers of Iranians registered at Japanese city halls between 1987 and 2003 was very small in each year compared to new entrants. This large gap suggests that most of the Iranians either did not know that they must register at the city hall of their residing city, or were afraid to do so because of their illegal status. Eighteen of our interviewees told us that for almost the entire first year that they worked in Japan they did not know and were not told that they had to register. They stated that until the time that they had to go to the tax office, they were unaware of the registration process. However, this important information was soon made known among Iranians and the number of registrants subsequently increased rapidly, while remaining far less than the number of new entrants.

In recent years, the numbers of registrants and residents, legal and illegal, are very similar, which suggests that almost all residing people have now registered. Only a small number of people who have no passport are not registered and have no foreign registration card.

**Figure 7: Trends in Registered Number of Iranian Nationals in Japan (1987–2003)**



Source: Ministry of Justice, "Statistics on Foreigners Registered in Japan." 1985-2003.

### Iranians Immigrating to Japan

#### *Interviewees*

This study is partly based on the data from the database constructed from the data published by Japanese authorities, in addition to information that we were able to gather via intensive discussions with our interviewees. Our sample consisted of 60 individuals: 52 males and eight females. There were four children interviewed; two of them came to Japan with their parents when they were six and two years old, and they are now 18 and 14, respectively. Two remaining children were born in Japan, a 12- and a 6-year-old. The

average age of the interviewees at the time of entry to Japan was 26, and at the time of interview was 38, demonstrating that it was primarily young men that moved from Iran to Japan, their main purpose being to get a highly-paid job. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, names are not mentioned in the analysis below and have instead been replaced with numbers.

#### *Immigrating to Japan: entry and settlement*

All of the interviewees told us that they had no plan nor any dream of going to Japan until they first heard about the “golden opportunity”, as one of them put it. No. 6 told us that he had no knowledge of Japan, and a number of them told us that their knowledge of Japan had been limited to the TV character Oshin, which was broadcast on Iranian TV twice in the years after the revolution. Some were familiar with other movies and Japanese film directors such as Kurosawa and Ozu.

Word of mouth and the eagerness of Iranian people to communicate via personal contacts and close networks transferred the news about the “golden opportunity” so quickly that thousands of Iranian young and unemployed men departed for Japan, even if they barely knew anything about it or the future ahead of them.

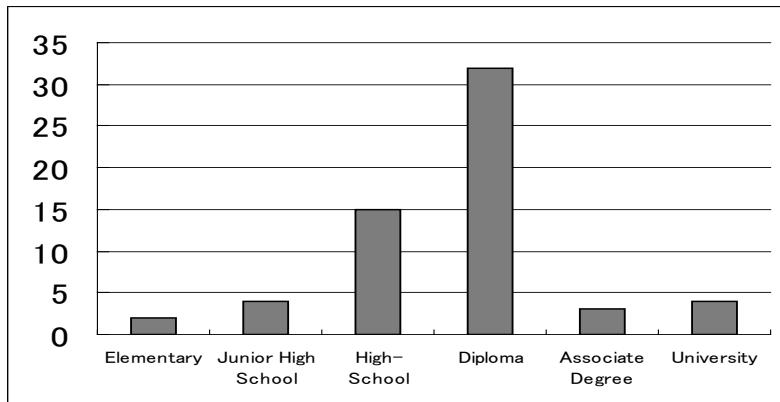
Due to a bilateral visa-exemption agreement, which was set up years before the revolution, Iranians did not need any visa to enter Japan. This, along with the advancement in transportation, facilitated trips to the country. The rush to buy subsidized cheap tickets provided by Iran Air was so dramatic that the *Japan Times* published an article about it, in which it was described as “the flight to happiness and economic success” (*Japan Times* 1991b). All but one of our interviewees came to Japan legally on a three-month visa given to them after they arrived at Narita Airport. One entered using a fake passport that he bought in Indonesia. He left Iran illegally because he did not do his compulsory two-year military service. He claimed that his journey to Japan consisted of him being taken to Turkey by smugglers, and from there to Indonesia. All other male interviewees had completed their military service.

There have been claims that many Iranians come to Japan via Azerbaijan and Russia, moving by ship into Japanese harbors from Vladivostok (Kunitsyn 1998). Aside from the interviewees, we have met people who came to Japan on fake passports made in Southeast Asian countries. There are many stories of such activities and its consequences, such as imprisonment in Malaysia or other countries. However, this subject is beyond our research here, yet does need a detailed study.

#### *Education*

Figure 8 presents the level of education of our interviewees. In this figure, *high-school* refers to those who have some high school education and *diploma* refers to those who have completed high school and received their high school diplomas – a degree to confirm the end of 12 years of education in the Iranian educational system.

**Figure 8: Level of Education of the Interviewees**



Source: The authors' calculations.

Interviewee No. 20 had finished his four-year study at a prestigious university in Iran and was a commercial pilot before coming to Japan. Those with associate degrees from Iranian colleges of technology and those who graduated from universities told us that the education they received in Iran helped them find better jobs in Japan after working for a few years as simple laborers.

The lack of visa status is threatening the second generation of Iranian immigrants. No. 22, who is presently 18 years old and about to graduate from high school, is not sure if she can enter a university next year because she has no visa.

#### *Language and religion*

All of the interviewees said that when they arrived they did not know the Japanese language at all. None of them had received any Japanese language instruction before coming to Japan or after their arrival. However, most of them can now speak Japanese fluently after many years of living and working in the country, although many continue to be unable to read and write. Numbers 4, 6, 19 and 21 have managed to gain their proficiency certificates in the Japanese language, which is the highest certificate in Japan. We observed that female interviewees who did not work could speak little Japanese, as their contact with Japanese nationals was limited.

Most of the interviewees learned Japanese via a long, frustrating course of living and working in Japan: "Listening to people who talk to each other on trains, in shops, and the like", as No. 34 stated. Two female and more than 15 male interviewees enjoyed some free classes at the city halls near their homes, and in this way they made good friends with their teachers and other classmates from other countries. Numbers 11, 34, 42, 54, and 57 each won prizes for participating in speech contests, and two of them entered higher speech contests and won more significant prizes. Yet the majority only mastered the language that was spoken in their working environment, and consequently found the television news difficult to understand. Interestingly and naturally, some had acquired the dialect spoken in their area of residence, which is usually different from that spoken in Tokyo – the "standard" Japanese taught in schools.

None of our interviewees showed any sign of having any problem concerning religious matters in Japan. A minority of our interviewees used to pray before coming to

Japan and they still do. This is significant as it points to a difference in the relevance of religion in Iranian immigrants to Japan and those of other studies of Iranian migration. Interviewees said that they found Japanese food delicious after a few months' adjustment, and all except one female appreciated the abundance and variety of food available in Japan. Almost all Iranians we met during the research stated that they liked the *nashi* – Japanese apple pear – it being very similar to the Iranian pear in taste, though different in shape. However, almost all complained about the taste of fruit in general and thought this the main reason why they had inadequate fruit and vitamins in their diet.

### *Job hunting*

Entering Japan does not mean reaching the goldmine. After the upheaval of leaving one's home country and arriving as a foreigner, one has to find a job. Interviewee number 18 said that when he landed in Narita Airport, a number of Iranians approached him and told him that they could find him employment. He found his first job in this way. He had to pay them a small portion of his wage that they called a "charge".

But as there were few brokers to find jobs for them, interviewees primarily found their jobs through their personal contacts, friends, relatives or friends of friends. Most often the relatives or friends who had originally informed them about the possibility of employment in Japan found them jobs when they arrived in Japan. This appears to reflect the cultural tradition of Iranian people abroad, and diasporic communities in general (Pourmehdi 2001).

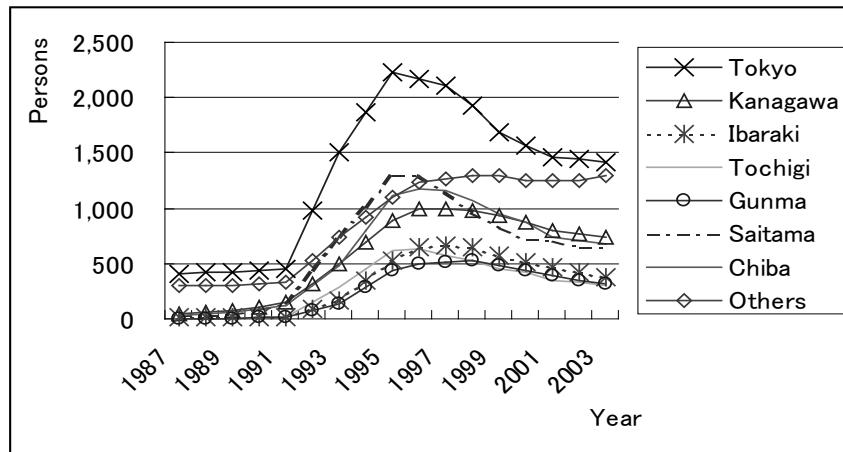
I just called my cousin when I came out of Narita. He was in Ashikaga-shi. He told me how to go there and I started working at the same factory, a plastic factory, where my cousin worked. (Interviewee No. 56)

### *Jobs*

It is impossible to classify the jobs Iranians are engaged in as one group. It is, however, easy to see that they all currently have employment in the so-called "3K" category. "3K" stands for the Japanese terms: *kiken* (dangerous), *kitsui* (grueling, physically hard) and *kitanai* (dirty) (Sugimoto 1997). Most of these jobs are outdoors, and very hot and humid in summer and cold in winter. Nearly all of the workers suffer from dust in their work environments. Many stated that they have asthma due to being exposed to thinners and other chemicals at work. They also suffered from the "bad" smell of the material they worked with, such as glue or fertilizer.

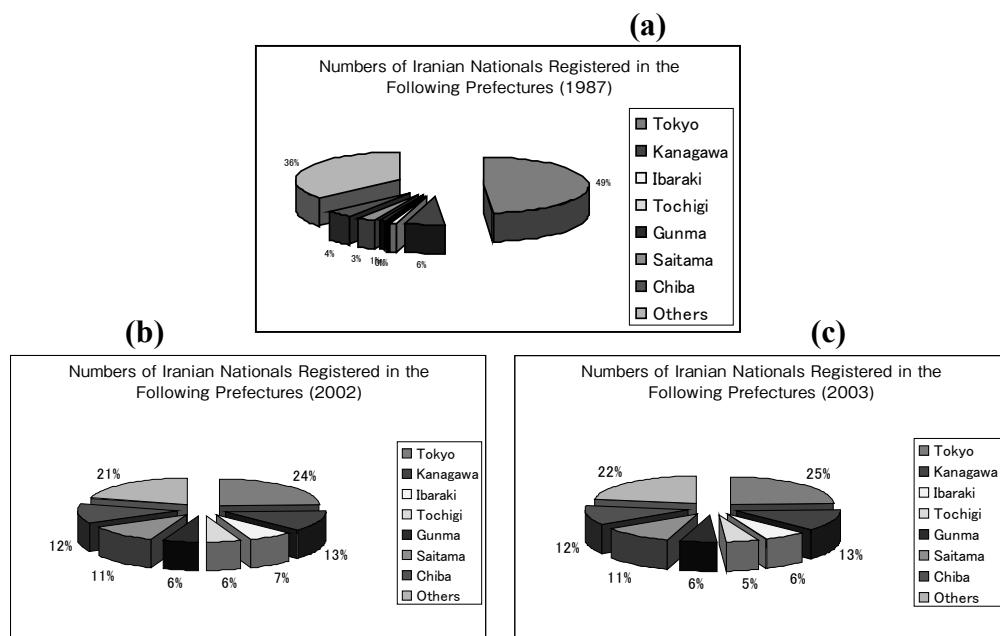
Figure 9 shows the dispersion of Iranians in different prefectures. This spread over the prefectures such as Gunma, Ibaraki, Tochigi, Saitama and Chiba can be understood by noting the existence of medium and small enterprises (SMEs) in such places. Large firms need workers with legal status, while the Iranians have no visa and so cannot work for them. We were told of a large factory in Gunma which hires Brazilians who have visas to work during the week. However, this company has somehow managed to hire Iranians or other foreigners with no visa, such as people from Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, to work only on Sundays.

**Figure 9: Trends in the Numbers of Iranian Nationals Registered by Prefecture (1987-2003)**



Source: Ministry of Justice, “Statistics on Foreigners Registered in Japan.” 1985-2003. Our interviews revealed that during the first years of their stay, the interviewees had moved from one job to the next, but once they finally found a “suitable” job, they worked there for many years without moving. This is illustrated by Figure 10, which is based on the data from our database.

**Figure 10: Dispersion of Iranians Registered in the Different Prefectures in Japan**



Source: Ministry of Justice, “Statistics on Foreigners Registered in Japan.” 1985-2003. Figure 10 confirms what we found in our interviews: the initial large movement among Iranian workers, due to their early efforts to find jobs in areas other than their own, and which, as stated by our interviewees, may in turn be due to their loss of jobs. When unemployed in this way, they moved to another job, which may have been in another area,

and since they usually found their jobs through their personal contacts, they had no option but to go to the place where a friend often lived and found them a job. All interviewees confirmed this scenario, since most of them had experienced the same story or knew of others that had. However, comparing Figures 10b and 10c with Figure 10a reveals that now there is a settled spread of people in the different prefectures, suggesting that in recent years they have settled down. According to the interviewees, one reason they have settled is that they have made good relationships with the company where they work and adapted to their present environment, and did not wish to jeopardize their status by moving.

### *Training*

Apart from those interviewees who studied at Iranian universities and colleges, and the 18 people who received their high-school diplomas from *honarestan* (technical high schools in Iran), before coming to Japan none of the interviewees had received any training that could be used in their job-hunting processes in Japan. And after coming to Japan, none of them had received any training, often because there was no organization to give it and they had no available time. In response to our inquiries as to why they did not receive training, Nos. 5, 17, 26, 45, 47 and 54 told us that not only did they not have the time for training, they also had not imagined that they would stay in Japan for such a long period. Number 15's answer is typical of the answers we were given:

Every year I thought I will go back next year, now 12 years has passed and I am still here in this unknown situation without any plan for the future. (Interviewee No. 15.)

In most cases the Iranian workers mastered their jobs simply by doing them for such a long time. Now, their companies rely on them and “would be in trouble without them”, as one Japanese factory owner informed us when speaking about his Iranian employee.

## **Living situations**

### *Housing*

Most Iranian workers live alone or in groups with other Iranians in group homes, usually supplied by their companies. They seldom live with people from other nations. Almost every interviewee lived with other Iranians for at least a few years after first arriving in Japan, but later they managed to rent private homes, although many of them still live in the homes provided by their companies. “Such homes are usually very near the company, therefore, most of them are far from residential areas and in this way, it adds to the difficulty of communicating with Japanese people,” Interviewee No. 43 told us. The companies that provide these homes charge a small rent. However, as No. 11 stated, “Such homes are not really livable.”

In Japan, there are mainly two types of homes: homes that are made of concrete and rather modern materials — the so-called “mansions” — and old homes made of wood and traditional materials. Almost all of the immigrant workers interviewed live in wooden homes, which are extremely cold in winter, but hot and humid in summer. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to rent a mansion if you are an over-stay immigrant. “There is lots of discrimination when you go to rent a home, it depends on where you are from,”

No. 18 says. However, most times the employer acts as the guarantor of the immigrant and they can rent an old home.

Living alone, with long and unusual working hours, such as working at night, has had a negative effect on some of the interviewees. No. 27 stated that he had developed a kind of anxiety disorder and his psychiatrist has urged him to go back to Iran as soon as possible, try to communicate with other people, or perhaps marry. "Working at nights does not allow any time for people to communicate with others, and it brings on depression and other mental disorders," said No. 33, who suffers from serious depression and is taking medication. He worked during the nights at a plastic company in Ashikaga-shi, in Tochigi prefecture for eight years. He worked from 8 p.m. until 8 a.m. It took him one hour to come home, take a shower and sleep. He usually slept for about seven hours, which left him only three more hours before going to work again. In his free time he found that the majority of other people were working, and as a consequence he could not communicate with other people. "That is why I am depressed," he believes.

Some of our interviewees, as can be seen in Table A-1, are married and live with their wives and children. During the research we heard many stories about the promises and fears, positive and negative consequences of such marriages. Marriages between immigrants and Japanese women itself is a very important topic that needs to be studied in depth, but it is beyond the scope of this present research.

### *Community*

Iranians in Japan do not seem to have an organized or even semi-organized community; instead they each form their own local network of Iranians: friends from their previous jobs, those who knew each other in Iran or friends of friends, relatives of relatives. Iranians in Japan suffer from a lack of any social understanding. We recorded many complaints about the ignorance and indifference of Japanese society, which our interviewees found very painful.

### *Accidents, hazards, and illnesses*

The majority of Japanese small workshops that immigrants work in usually do not obey the minimum safety standards. Their machinery and tools are out-of-date and the environment of the workshops is, contrary to our initial expectation, extremely dirty. There is not enough light or air conditioning, and in many cases the work takes place outdoors. The layout of the machinery and other materials often do not appear to be optimized, and one can usually and easily find dangerous objects on the floor or walkways.

Such factors appear to have been the cause of many workplace accidents. No. 3 lost two fingers on his right hand while employed at a machine tools workshop. He worked there for 12 years and, when this accident happened, his *shacho* (owner of the company) informed the police, who arrested him and, as he states:

I had to change the bandage of my own hand by myself in the police station during my detention. This was exactly when I needed to have some sympathy, and on the contrary I faced lots of difficulties. (Interviewee No. 3)

He subsequently married his Japanese girlfriend, which enabled him to be released from police detention.

Many more injuries can be listed. Number 5 informed us that he has been working

from 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. every day except Sundays for eight years, and now he suffers from a backache. In response to the question "Why do you work so much?" he answered, "I have two children and I must work and support them. My wage is very low, so I should work more." Number 9 developed a very rare kind of cancer, according to her doctor. She believes that she got the disease because she was exposed to some kind of chemical used in the textile factory, where she worked for seven years. Number 20 showed his arms to us and a clear difference between his two elbows was observable. His right elbow was unusually larger than the left one. He has to move his right hand in a specific pattern hundreds of times in a day in order to make a type of paint and this unusual movement has unbalanced his joints. The *Japan Times* reported on a 12-year-old Iranian boy crushed inside recycling wheels (*Japan Times* 1991a). Number 56 seriously injured his left elbow while he was working in front of a conveyor that had no safety cover.

Overwork and heavy tasks are two other causes of accidents. Number 51 suffers from an injured left knee. A Japanese doctor helped him get some compensation from Japan's work insurance, but his knee cannot fully recover. It was caused, he claims, by an incident in his workplace:

It was 10 at night and I had worked from 7:00 a.m., when my boss asked me to climb the stairs and bring down heavy boxes. I told him that I was tired, but every time I brought down one box, he said the next one would be the last one. He did not pay any attention to my complaints and he just called me "lazy". I remember I lifted up a box and when I came to the stairs my knees could not work and I fell down. (Interviewee No. 51)

Many immigrants become sick and their illnesses are directly or indirectly related to their jobs. They are exposed to poisonous chemicals such as thinners. Some have developed lung disorders because of working with fiberglass. While most of the immigrants discover they are sick when they are in Japan, we know of a number of cases of people who returned to Iran before they discovered they had dangerous illnesses. A Japanese doctor who speaks Farsi told us that, "We know a case leading to the death of the immigrant because of a rare kind of colon cancer."

#### *An innovative and immigrant-friendly hospital*

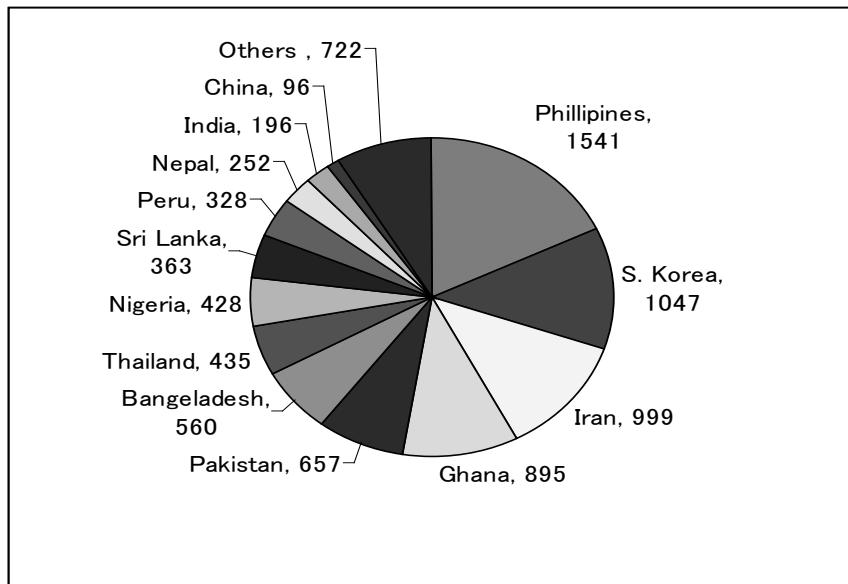
The immigrants without visas are considered to be illegal; therefore, they have no health insurance. This discourages immigrants from seeing doctors and consequently they leave their serious illnesses and injuries untreated.

In order to help immigrants with this problem, a hospital in Yokohama city set up a private fund for foreigners who could use this as private insurance. Every immigrant pays 2,000 yen per month, which entitles him or her to a medical examination at only 30 percent of the actual cost. In 1991 in Yokohama city, the minimum monthly payment for public health insurance for unmarried individuals was 2,080 yen, which illustrates that this hospital's offer is a fair option.

The language barrier also contributes to illegal immigrants not seeing doctors. They find it difficult to talk about their illnesses to doctors in a language different from their mother tongue. In the Yokohama hospital, almost every doctor is familiar with a foreign language such as Persian, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog and English. This has proved a great attraction for immigrants, along with the friendly attitude of the hospital. A patient

from the Philippines told us that she went there principally because she could “see a doctor who can understand Tagalog.” Figure 11 presents the number of patients participating in this hospital’s private fund, which is used as a small, private insurance fund.

**Figure 11: The Number of People Referred to the Hospital by Nationality in November 2001**



Source: Minatomachi Medical Center (2002)

The hospital has gathered data about different nationalities and their common illnesses. One of the doctors in this hospital lists skin diseases, asthma, and duodenal ulcer as the most common illnesses of Iranians (Minatomachi Medical Center 2002). The hospital and its fund also provide counseling and/or advice for immigrants who want to talk about their troubles with the doctors and fund group staff. According to this fund’s newsletter (Minatomachi Medical Center 2002), the immigrants’ main problems are as follows:

- 1) Some brokers leave their salaries unpaid. Such brokers take advantage of the immigrants’ illegal status and therefore unprotected and weak situation without a visa.
- 2) The employers stop paying the medical fees for their employees before their complete recovery from industrial accidents. Some employers do not know that the job hazards compensation system applies even to illegal immigrants. Some want to hide their own illegalities by employing overstaying immigrants.
- 3) Health issues – for example, the expensive cost of medical treatment. Because of their overstaying status they fear that they will be repatriated if reported to the police or immigration office.

This hospital is clearly playing an important role, but the existence of only one hospital means that its resources are stretched.

### *The big decision*

While “going back” seems to be the greatest hope of Iranian immigrants, they find it difficult to discuss the possibility seriously. Every time they meet each other, the first question is “Oh, you’re still here, when are you going to return?” and the answer is “How about you?” as if they expect others to speak for them.

Many different reasons were given to us for not going back. Some mention the lack of freedom and democracy in Iran, while others talk of the economic situation that has not improved in Iran since they came to Japan. Additionally, they are not sure if they can find a decent job in Iran. Those who have children whom have either been born or brought up in Japan are worried about their wellbeing. Such children have learned Japanese almost better than their mother tongue, and they are used to Japanese culture rather than Iranian. Some mention that they have passed the best and youngest years of their lives in Japan, in some cases nearly half of their life, and they would like to continue living there. Some think of Japan as their second country. Some came to Japan in the worst days of Iran, and since then they have heard only disappointing news. Consequently, to them the image of Iran remains negative. Some interviewees mentioned that their friends have mostly left Iran for other countries, or have been killed during the war. Many of our interviewees had lost their fathers or mothers – in two cases both – and they think there is no reason to go back now. Therefore, as No. 3 stated, “To me it seems that I am going to a new country, I must start from zero again.”

## **Policy Implications and Conclusion**

This article has been only an exploratory study of the situation of Iranian unskilled workers in Japan, but it nevertheless raises several significant issues. Firstly, analysis of the database built in this research enables a clearer picture to be built of the context of Iranian immigration into Japan during the beginning and throughout the bubble economy of the late 1980s and early 1990s. It can be seen that Japan’s economic need for unskilled workers, together with the poor situation in Iran, encouraged the migration of Iranians to Japan. Additionally, our interviews revealed the manner in which news of this opportunity spread.

The second observation is that we have seen something of the resourcefulness of immigrants in Japan, in how the Iranian workers adapted to their working and living environments, despite the lack of training available to them. They have been able to learn the Japanese language and cultural skills needed for their employment in the course of doing their jobs. Additionally, many have stated that after a short time in Japan, they became used to their general living surroundings, and the Japanese food, indeed claiming that they enjoy it. Yet, we have seen that this does not mean that their lives are comfortable. The “on-the-job training” that accounts for their language and cultural abilities is narrow and limited to the skills and language that are required for work. It does not extend, for example, to understanding other aspects of life in Japan.

Importantly, we have seen that Iranian labourers in Japan are at risk in the environments in which they work, indeed the majority of those interviewed reported high

incidences of injury. This aspect was one of the most striking findings, as it repeatedly arose during the period of research. Interviewees have suffered injury in the past, and many continue to be affected by illness. It is this point that highlights clearly the major difficulty that the workers face, and that influences the majority of their decisions in their life in Japan: every major decision that the Iranian workers make is shaped by their lack of legal visa status. This was seen in the difficult decision that the student had to make in relation to her desire to register for university study. It is seen in the difficulty that Iranian and other foreign residents experience in obtaining medical treatment, prompting the need for a specialised hospital that provides another form of “insurance”. It can also be seen in the discrimination that interviewees claimed they suffered in finding accommodation.

The visa issue is one that can only be solved by government. A policy needs to be developed that can enable the workers who arrived in Japan during the period of the bubble economy to register legally without consequence. As we saw in the first section of this article, these workers were required in order to fill the need for foreign labour, and fulfilled that requirement. The lack of infrastructure at the time in the form of adequate training and information about the need for foreign registrations can be seen as one factor that led to the current situation, where actively employed foreign workers have settled in Japan but do not have access to the services that other inhabitants have. We can assert that the present situation is due to a period in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Iranians and other immigrants that were so clearly an important element in the developing manufacturing industries were “overlooked” by the authorities. Now, in an environment of economic transformation from labour-intensive industry to a knowledge-driven economy, the necessity for foreign labour is severely reduced. In this context, the fear of deportation increases for those individuals who have settled in Japan, some now with families. The difficulty is not that the issue cannot be solved, but that to date nothing has been done to solve it. The immigrants, who have now begun to call Japan their “home”, live in a situation of dire uncertainty. Nobody knows what will happen, least of all those most affected by the issue. It is time, then, for action to be taken to address the status of Iranian workers; to recognise that policy needs to be developed within an understanding of the context of their arrival and present conditions. Our hope is that this article at least serves to begin this recognition.

**Appendix A: Table A-1 List of Interviewees**

No.	Gender	Birth Date	Bplace	Ethnicity	Entry	Living in	Marriage status	Education
1	M	1959	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1990	Tokyo	Japanese wife	Diploma
2	M	1965	Tehran	Ardebil	1990	Kanagawa	Japanese wife	Assoc Deg
3	M	1965	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1991	Kanagawa	Japanese wife	High School
4	M	1960	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1990	Kanagawa	Single	Diploma
5	M	1963	Rasht	Gilan	1991	Gunma	Iranian wife	High School
6	F	1967	Rasht	Gilan	1991	Gunma	Married to No.5	Diploma
7	M	1964	shahsavar	Mazandarar	1990	Gunma	Iranian wife	High School
8	M	1960	shahsavar	Mazandarar	1990	Gunma	Single	Diploma
9	F	1967	Borujerd	Lorestan	1990	Gunma	Married to No.7	Diploma
10	F	1966	shahsavar	Mazandarar	1990	Gunma	Single	Guidance
11	M	1969	Borujerd	Lorestan	1991	Chiba	Iranian wife	Diploma
12	F	1965	Borujerd	Lorestan	1999	Chiba	Married to No 11	Diploma
13	M	1960	Anzali	Gilan	1992	Kanagawa	Single	Diploma
14	M	1966	Sabzevar	Khorasan	1991	Kanagawa	Single	High School
15	M	1964	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1991	Kanagawa	Japanese wife	High School
16	M	1963	Tehran	Khuzestan	1989	Kanagawa	Japanese wife	Diploma
17	M	1959	Rasht	Gilan	1990	Tokyo	Japanese wife	Diploma
18	M	1961	Shahsavar	Mazandarar	1987	Gunma	Japanese wife	Diploma
19	M	1965	Tehran	Tehran	1988	Gunma	Japanese wife	Diploma
20	M	1964	Gilan	Gilan	1991	Gunma	Iranian wife	Licence
21	F	1973	Gilan	Gilan	1991	Gunma	Married to No.20	Diploma
22	F	1997	Tehran	Tehran		Gunma	Child of No. 20 and 21	
23	F	1999	Tehran	Tehran		Gunma	Child of No. 20 and 21	
24	F	1987	Gunma			Gunma	Child of Nos. 5 and 6	
25	M	1989	Gunma			Gunma	Child of Nos. 5 and 6	
26	M	1964	Rasht	Gilan	1990	Gunma	Single	Diploma
27	M	1967	Tehran	Tehran	1991	Kanagawa	Single	Diploma
28	M	1969	Rasht	Gilan	1990	Gunma	Single	Diploma
29	M	1961	Shahsavar	Mazandarar	1992	Gunma	Single	Guidance
30	M	1963	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1991	Chiba	Single	Assoc Deg
31	M	1959	Borujerd	Lorestan	1996	Tochigi	Single	Assoc Deg
32	M	1960	Tehran	Lorestan	1991	Kanagawa	Single	Diploma
33	M	1969	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1990	Gunma	Single	Diploma
34	M	1960	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1990	Kanagawa	Japanese wife	Guidance
35	M	1966	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1991	Kanagawa	Japanese wife	Guidance
36	M	1965	Tehran	Tehran	1993	Saitama	Japanese wife	High School
37	M	1967	Tehran	Tehran	1992	Chiba	Single	High School
38	M	1974	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1992	Chiba	Single	Diploma
39	M	1969	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1990	Tochigi	Single	Diploma
40	M	1953	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1991	Tokyo	Japanese wife	Diploma
41	M	1964	Tehran	Tehran	1991	Kanagawa	Single	Diploma
42	M	1964	Tehran	Tehran	1991	Kanagawa	Japanese wife	Diploma
43	M	1966	Tehran	Tehran	1987	Tokyo	Japanese wife	Diploma
44	M	1964	Rasht	Lorestan	1992	Ibaraki	Single	High School
45	M	1967	Tehran	Gilan	1991	Chiba	Single	Diploma
46	M	1964	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1990	Ibaraki	Japanese wife	High School
47	M	1964	Kordestan	Tehran	1993	Tokyo	Single	Dentist studer
48	M	1956	Tehran	Kordestan	1990	Tokyo	Single	University Stu
49	M	1964	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1990	Tokyo	Japanese wife	University Stu
50	M	1966	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1991	Kanagawa	Taiwanese wife	High School
51	M	1961	Lorestan	Lorestan	1994	Akita, now T	Japanese wife	High School
52	M	1963	Tehran	Lorestan	1992	Tokyo	Japanese wife	High School
53	M	1965	Tehran	Lorestan	1995	Tokyo	Single	Diploma
54	M	1963	Tehran	Tehran	1991	Tokyo	Japanese wife	Diploma
55	M	1964	Sari	Esfahan	1989	Tokyo	Single	Diploma
56	M	1964	Tehran	Esfahan	1991	Tokyo	Japanese wife	Diploma
57	M	1963	Tehran	Mazandarar	1988	Gunma	Japanese wife	High School
58	M	1964	Tehran	Mazandarar	1987	Gunma	Single	Diploma
59	M	1964	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1987	Gunma	Single	Diploma
60	M	1963	Tehran	Azrbaijan	1987	Gunma	Single	Diploma

## **Appendix B Case study: A Visit to a Factory**

In order to better know the immigrants' working conditions, we visited a S.M.E. in Yokohama. Established 42 years ago, its main product is heating wire, a so-called "element" used in electrical appliances, such as electrical pots and the like. This firm currently has 11 employees, including two Iranians. One of them has been working there for more than 12 years, and the other, who has been in Japan for more than 13 years, moved to this new job half a year ago. The older Iranian worker invited the new one to his factory and introduced him to his employer.

Most of the immigrants to Japan are given jobs considered as "3K", that is, *kitanai* (dirty), *kitsui* (grueling, physically hard), and *kiken* (dangerous). The employees of the factory we visited were no exception. The building is very old and dark with only a few small windows. All of the machinery is dirty and has been operating for at least 20 years. Among them, thin and hard-to-see metal wires are running without any safety covers, even at employees' neck height. Safety standards in general are not met in this factory.

"Twelve years ago, there were language and cultural problems between the Japanese and Iranian employees," says the owner. For example, every day when the machinery stops at 5:10 p.m., Japanese workers usually spend 20 minutes watching T.V. together; in this way they are present in the factory environment for a longer time. However, the Iranian workers tend to go home as soon as possible. According to their contracts, the working hours of Iranians and Japanese are the same, until 5:30PM.

"Personal trust," the employer explains, is the reason why he decided to hire the Iranian worker without a visa, in spite of the risks. For example, 12 years ago, when the employer bought a bankrupt company (the former company the same Iranian worker used to work at), the Iranian worker asked the new owner to lend him some money, although it was only one or two months after they met each other. The employer did not lend the money, but rather gave it to him, considering the old Japanese saying "Money lent, money gone." However, the Iranian returned the money little by little over two to three months.

Recently, he has been put in charge of maintenance and management of all the machinery. The employer said that he works twice as hard as other Japanese workers. In this factory, the workers' average age is over 60. Young Japanese workers usually cannot bear "3K" jobs and soon leave. As the employer said, the factory would be in trouble if the immigrant returned to Iran.

The employer emphasized that the immigrants who entered Japan during the bubble economy, and who are still working in Japan, have been able to adapt to Japanese working society. He added that the system of repatriation of illegal immigrants causes many problems for employers and small industries. "The employees' troubles are equally the troubles for the employers," he said.

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