

Job Mecca

By Ato Ekusa

Recently I was walking in Uchi-saiwai-cho, one of Tokyo's business districts, when a young woman approached and asked me something in English. She was smartly dressed, with dark eyes, an intelligent-looking face and braided hair.

Showing me a piece of paper with an address and what looked like the name of a restaurant written on it in roman letters, she asked me if I knew how to get there. Tokyo addresses are very difficult to find, even for Japanese. As I was going in the same direction, I decided it would be easier to go along with her than to explain the way in my broken English.

We soon came to the area she was looking for, which was in Shimbashi, one of the city's most popular eating and drinking spots. When we found the restaurant I was surprised, because it was quite a large establishment specializing in *yakitori*.

At first I thought that maybe the woman was a Japanese who had returned to Japan after spending her childhood in another country and could not speak the language. It turned out, however, that she was a Chinese from Shanghai who had come to study Japanese at a language school. According to the owner of the

restaurant, she was studying at school during the daytime and wanted a job in the restaurant as a waitress at night. She had got the address from another Chinese student who was already working in the restaurant.

This experience made me aware how deeply foreign workers have penetrated Japanese society in the last couple of years. Go to a restaurant or drinking place in Tokyo entertainment districts such as Ikebukuro, Shinjuku or Ueno in the evening these days, and you are sure to come across many waitresses who have to ask you to repeat your order because they do not understand Japanese very well. Take a look in the kitchen, and you will probably see several dark-skinned young men, obviously not Japanese, busy washing the dishes. These young men have come from such countries as Bangladesh to study Japanese, and are working part-time in the evening to make ends meet.

Looking around, you can see many foreigners working in Japan now. People from China and South Korea can understand the *kanji* characters used in written Japanese fairly well, so they look for part-time work in which this knowledge will

help them. For example, because they can read addresses and names, many Chinese students can obtain part-time work delivering newspapers or sorting letters at post offices.

Many students from such countries as Bangladesh and the Philippines, meanwhile, are forced to engage in manual labor, because they do not know the language very well. They can be seen on construction sites in Tokyo, busily hauling around the heavy building materials.

Once, when I was traveling in the rural Tohoku district of northern Japan during the rice-harvesting season, I noticed some foreign students carrying bundles of rice plants. On another occasion, when I was invited to a European ambassador's residence in Tokyo for a reception marking his country's national day, all the women working as assistants at the function appeared to be from Southeast Asian countries.

It is not unusual to find women from Southeast Asia working in Japan, but until recently they were employed mainly as hostesses in high-class bars and cabarets in such places as Tokyo's Ginza or as entertainers at hotels in hot-spring resorts. Recently, however, an increasing number of men and women from Southeast Asia have begun doing a wider range of jobs in Japan. In many cases, they arrive in this country nominally to attend a Japanese-language school, but actually want to find jobs and send part of their earnings back to their families in their home countries.

Japan does not permit foreign workers to engage in unskilled labor. According to the Ministry of Labor, the number of foreigners discovered working illegally in Japan in the first half of 1989 reached about 9,300. The reason most of them had come was to find what for them is comparatively well-paid work in Japan and send money home to help their poverty-stricken families. Japan now faces the difficult problem of whether to keep the doors closed or to change its tune and allow these foreign laborers to work here legally.



The number of workers coming to Japan from the Philippines, Pakistan and other parts of Asia is rapidly increasing.



Many foreign students from Asia study the Japanese language during the daytime and work at night.

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