

# Fugitive Foreign Laborers On the Long Road to Riches

By Takahiro Takesue

About 50 Asian men and women, all looking utterly bored, wait in the bare hallway. Most of the men are in their 20s and 30s. Some are in suits, others are wearing plain jackets. There is almost no conversation, but the piles of cigarette butts in the metal ashtrays testify to how long they have been waiting for their names to be called.

It's a typical scene at the Third Security Department of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau in the downtown Otemachi district. Third Security's job is to crack down on foreigners staying in Japan illegally or engaged in activities outside the terms of their entry visas. The Asians waiting in the hallway had come to turn themselves in.

Asked what he has come for, one man glares at his questioner. "This," he says bluntly. Thrusting his hands forward and crossing them at the wrists, he mimes being handcuffed, then shrugs. His name is Garcia. A 27-year-old Filipino, he used to run a car repair shop with his brother in Manila. But in February last year he came to Japan on a tourist visa and found work in Shinjuku and Yokohama. Starting out as a laborer for a building demolition company, he soon quit, becoming a waiter at a Shinjuku bar for about ¥170,000 (\$1,300 at the rate of ¥130/\$) a month. "It isn't bad, is it?" he said proudly, explaining that he sent half his salary to his parents in the Philippines. But why did he come to immigration on his own?

## Soaring numbers

"Because I want to go back to the Philippines," Garcia explains. "I've saved enough money. I enjoyed my work. I drank every night, sang *karaoke* and got lots of tips. If I have the chance, I will come back to Japan again." Grinning, he vanishes into one of the investigation rooms.

The number of illegal foreign workers



The scene at Tokyo Immigration Bureau, where foreign residents of the Japanese capital are issued with visas.

in Japan is soaring. Estimates of their number range from 20,000 to as high as 70,000; the truth is that nobody really knows. In the past, most of the illegals were Filipino women. Known as "*Japayuki-san*" (girls going to Japan), they worked in bars, cabarets and other drinking establishments. But since about two years ago, it has been the men who have been on the rise.

"Today, as every day, we've sent out eight officers to catch illegal workers," explains a weary public security officer in one of the investigation rooms. "Last year, we cracked down on 198 establishments that were illegally employing foreigners. But our department only has 29 officers. The number of illegal foreign workers has been on the increase, but our staff has been the same size for five years. The situation is out of control."

Last year more than 11,000 foreigners were apprehended by the Justice Ministry for illegally staying in Japan after the expiration of their visas, a two-fold increase in three years. Forty percent of those taken into custody were male, and more than 80% of them had come from the three countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines. But perhaps most remarkably, nearly 70% had gone to the authorities of their own accord.

The same official explained, "They don't come to immigration because their conscience pricks them, but because they want to go home. They know that anyone whose visa has expired won't be allowed to leave Japan until they've been pro-

cessed by our office. So they have to come here anyway."

Most illegals enter Japan on a tourist visa, although as immigration screening has tightened some have acquired student visas ostensibly to enroll in Japanese language schools. But unlike more serious students, their sole aim is to find work. They often show remarkable familiarity with ways to enter Japan and with the procedures they have to go through to leave the country.

Arde, a 24-year-old Iranian, is silently washing dishes beside the cook in a curry shop. Two months have passed since he started working in this small restaurant in downtown Tokyo. He speaks hardly any Japanese. Working from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., he gets ¥3,500 (about \$27) and two free meals a day.

## Land of gold

Standing beside Arde, the proprietor of the curry shop is more than satisfied. "He neither smokes nor drinks. He dozes off sometimes, but he works hard." The slightly built Arde, speaking in heavily accented English, said, "I came to Japan because I wanted to make money. I heard from my Iranian friends in Japan that there are lots of places here where we can work."

The Asians who come to Japan to work illegally make no bones about it. They are here for the money—nothing else. In the past, Pakistani and Filipino men poured into the Middle East to work as laborers



in construction projects. But construction work has dried to a trickle as crude oil prices have slumped, while the appreciation of the yen has made Japan an ever more attractive place to work. In just one month in Japan they can earn enough money to live for six months in their own country. To them Japan is truly, as the first Portuguese visitors called it, "a land of gold."

Arde worked in a bank in Iran before he came to Japan. His monthly salary was \$600, which he said was not bad. Asked whether there was any psychological barrier to switching from being a bank employee to a dishwasher, he replies simply, "I didn't care about the kind of work. The point was to make more money."

Arde's life is simplicity itself. With a fellow countryman, he shares a small 10 square-meter room which his employer found for him near the restaurant. There is no bath, and he has to share the toilet with other tenants. The room does have a small kitchen, and he splits the rent of ¥60,000 (\$460) a month with his roommate. Other than that he needs about ¥12,000 (\$90) a month for breakfast and seldom spends money on anything else. The room came with a refrigerator, dishes and tableware, a television and a radio cassette recorder, most of which were left behind by Iranians who occupied the room before him. He brought clothes and shoes with him, together with seven Iranian books. On Sundays and national holidays he sleeps all day in his apartment.

Arde's frugal life is in stark contrast

to the affluence of young Japanese men of his age, whose rooms are packed with appliances such as videos and CD players and who can take part in leisure activities every day if they want to. Even so, the hard-working Iranian says he has no complaints.

"I will work in Japan until I save \$3,000," says Arde. "For what shall I use the money, you say? For marriage. In Iran it costs a lot of money to marry." Speaking about marriage, his grim face broke into a smile for the first time.

Asians can be found working almost anywhere in Japan today. They work in a variety of jobs—on construction and demolition sites, as packers in factories, and as handymen in shops. Some work on farms. Yet virtually all are manual laborers, and most of the jobs available to them are monotonous and dirty.

One 25-year-old Pakistani in a cardboard factory is a university graduate, earning money to enter postgraduate school when he returns home. He spits out in fluent English, "You don't need to ask me whether my work is hard. You can see for yourself. What else can I say?" He refuses to say more. For his labors he is paid ¥5,000 (about \$38) a day, about half the daily wage of a Japanese laborer.

Daily wages are a frequent source of trouble among Pakistanis working illegally in Japan because a Pakistani middleman is involved. The middleman, a long-time resident of Japan, finds jobs for his fellow countrymen who do not understand the language. He picks up their

wages on pay day on their behalf, and pockets his take before giving the remainder to the workers. Angry over being exploited, some workers once attacked a middleman's apartment. The rise of illegal "placement agencies" is more evidence that Asian workers are penetrating deeper and deeper into Japanese society.

Some of the highest concentrations of illegal Asian workers are to be found in the factory areas of Kawaguchi, Toda and Warabi in Saitama Prefecture near Tokyo. Police and immigration officers have repeatedly cracked down on illegal laborers in these areas, but there is no end to the influx. "They are like flowing water," says a detective at the Warabi Police Station. "After a crackdown, Asian laborers will disappear for some time, but then they flow right back."

## Asking for work

The city of Kawaguchi is famous for its foundries. Around 8 a.m., Asian men mingle in the crowd of Japanese workers waiting for a bus in the square in front of the railway station. Three who look like Pakistanis ride a bus for about 20 minutes, then get off and disappear into a canning factory. Asked for permission to interview the three apparently Pakistani workers, the factory manager retorts, "We don't hire foreigners."

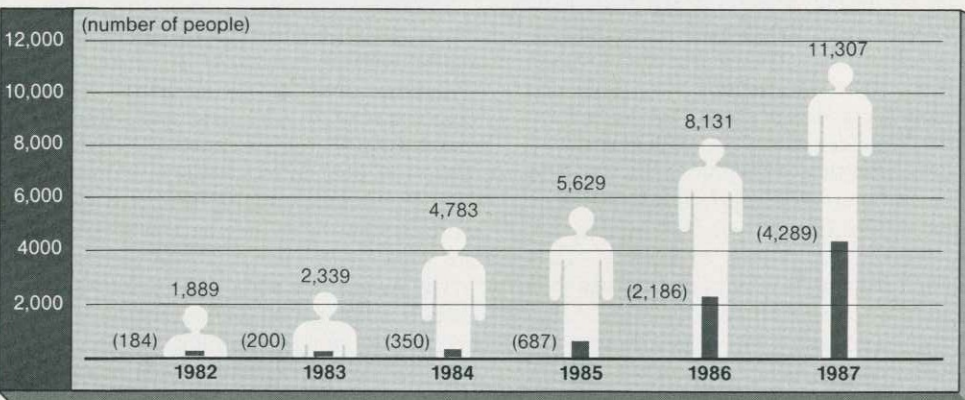
"We just saw them enter your factory."

"I don't know. I have no idea what you're talking about," snaps the manager, and slams the door.

The presence of foreigners in Kawaguchi first began to attract attention about two years ago. They would be seen in twos and threes, going from factory door to factory door asking for work. Keizo Fukuda of the Kawaguchi Foundry Industry Cooperative is vehement on the subject. "When illegal laborers were nabbed two years ago, we instructed members of our cooperative not to hire non-Japanese," he declares. "Since then, no company in this area has hired foreigners illegally. Snooping by reporters just causes trouble."

Yet one foundry proprietor, speaking on the condition that his name not be used, said there still are companies which

Fig. 1 Foreigners Engaging in Unauthorized Activities or Staying Illegally



Note: Figures in parentheses are males.  
Source: Immigration Bureau, Justice Ministry



give jobs to non-Japanese workers.

It is a difficult situation for the foundries of Kawaguchi, for their past prosperity is on the wane. There are still about 270 of them in business, but this is barely half the peak figure, and most are subsistence-level subcontractors with 20 employees or less. Moreover, they are being squeezed to lower their prices. The proprietress of a factory in the old foundry area in front of the railway station complained, "We were told to cut our price three times by our major contractor. He said it was because of the strong yen. We'd already cut our costs to the bone, but we were forced to reduce our prices further because our contractor threatened to take the work to other foundries. The days of the foundry industry in Kawaguchi are numbered."

One way to cut costs is to use cheaper labor, an option that is all the more attractive when most of people working in the foundries are already in their 50s and 60s. It is very rare to see a young man in the plants, where cast metal parts are produced by pouring molten pig iron heated to 1,500 degrees C into molds. Temperatures inside the foundries soar above 40 degrees C in the summer. Working clothes are coated black with soot. No wonder young people who know about the light and clean work available in the service industry shy away from the foundries.

"People say there is a shortage of workers, but there are always lots of workers who have quit their jobs at other factories," said an elderly factory proprietor who has hired foreigners in the past. "The real reason for using foreigners is that they can be hired for low wages. Their wages are usually half those of Japanese workers. Besides, workers in foundries often suffer from burns, but foreigners never complain about such accidents."

Asian laborers must seem a godsend to foundries burdened with high labor costs and shunned by young Japanese workers. To the Asians, meanwhile, foundry work may be hard and dirty, but it lets them earn good money.

The Japanese government is at a loss how to deal with illegal foreign laborers. Opinion is sharply divided. One view

holds that the doors should be opened to foreign workers. The other view is exclusionist, arguing that priority must be given to preserving the social order and employment opportunities for Japanese.

A Labor Ministry official cites Western Europe when arguing that the influx of foreign workers should be halted. "West Germany accepted a large number of foreign workers beginning in the 1960s," he says. "As a result, public order deteriorated and crime increased. Today, West Germany drives foreigners out of the country. It's as clear as day that the social order will deteriorate if Japan accepts foreign workers."

This opinion is representative of the exclusionist school. The Labor Ministry's "Group for Studying the Problem of Foreign Workers" recently compiled a report on the employment of foreigners. The report recommended that the present framework for so-called "intellectual" workers should be expanded, but said the influx of foreign manual workers should be strictly controlled.

## Differing Status

Critics of the report take issue with its conclusions. The only difference between foreigners who work in Japan in more intellectual tasks and those who work as manual laborers is that the status of the former is certified. Back in their own countries all the foreigners who have come to work in Japan belong to the middle class. People in the lower class could not even afford to pay their passage to Japan.

"Tokyo suffers from a shortage of laborers because of the office building construction boom," said the Japanese supervisor at one construction site. "Japanese seasonal laborers alone aren't enough to meet the demand. The construction industry is conducting its own investigation into the hiring of illegal foreign laborers, but it is only a gesture. What the industry really wants is to hire foreign laborers in large numbers."

The argument that foreigners will steal away jobs from Japanese workers hardly seems persuasive in the context of today's labor shortage.

But there is far more agreement on the problem of public order. Yoshio Sato runs a butcher shop and a restaurant in Tokyo. He began hiring foreigners two years ago, and now has a total of 13 foreigners including Chinese, Laotians and Filipinos working in his two establishments as cooks, waiters and butchers. Sato is one of the few Japanese managers who have genuine sympathy for foreign workers. He built a dormitory for his workers, and serves as their guarantor when they enroll in Japanese language schools. He even took the necessary steps to make them eligible for worker accident compensation, a procedure that is available for foreign workers but is virtually never done. Nonetheless, even Sato is apprehensive about the increasing number of foreigners in Japan. "If this goes much further, there will be many problems," he warns. "The present number is probably just right."

No matter how much restrictions are tightened, the influx of Asian workers into Japan cannot be halted. They will keep coming because there is a demand for their labor, a demand created by Japanese industry itself.

Takashi Wakii, a restaurant proprietor who has been studying the employment and livelihood of foreigners in Japan, takes a longer view. "Japan has caused the world great trouble, both in war and in trade. It should not be such a problem to accept foreign workers in atonement for our misbehavior," he says. People who share this opinion, however, are still in the minority.

Far more common were the unsavory views encountered in gathering material for this article. A woman tobacco shop keeper in Kawaguchi perhaps spoke best for this silent majority. "You mean those dark people?" she said. "I don't know why, but they make me uncomfortable."

Her words probably sum up the true feelings of most Japanese as they confront the growing issue of Asian laborers in Japan. ■

*Takahiro Takesue is a free-lance journalist who regularly contributes articles on economic and high-tech issues to newspapers and periodicals.*